

National Cholesterol Education Month

National Cholesterol Education Month is observed during the month of September to increase awareness of our cholesterol levels and to educate on ways to achieve healthy cholesterol levels. Education is important as high blood cholesterol is asymptomatic and is one of the major risk factors for heart disease, which is the leading cause of death in the United States.

Cholesterol is a waxy fat-like substance required by our bodies to make hormones. It is also a major component in cell membranes and aids in digestion. Cholesterol is produced in our bodies and can be found in some of the foods we consume. Cholesterol is carried in our bloodstream through particles called lipoproteins. There are two major types of these lipoproteins: high-density lipoprotein (HDL) and low-density lipoprotein (LDL). High density lipoproteins are often called the “good” cholesterol while low-density lipoproteins are called the “bad” cholesterol. When there is too much LDL cholesterol in the bloodstream, this can build up in the artery walls and can affect heart function and increase your risk of heart disease.

Behaviors such as lack of physical activity, consuming an unhealthy diet, and smoking can contribute to negatively effect your cholesterol levels. Other factors for high blood cholesterol include:

- **Overweight or obesity-** Physical inactivity, unhealthy eating patterns, and excess weight can lead to high blood cholesterol.
- **Diabetes-** Type 2 diabetes can lead to an increase in LDL or “bad” cholesterol and a decrease in HDL or “good” cholesterol.
- **Older age-** As an individual ages, risk increases as the body is unable to get rid of cholesterol as efficiently.
- **Being male-** Men have a tendency to have higher “bad” cholesterol and lower “good” cholesterol than women. Once women reach the age of menopause (around 55 years of age), LDL levels in women have shown to increase.
- **A family history of heart disease or high blood cholesterol-** Individuals with family members that have high blood cholesterol can have a higher risk. This increased risk could be hereditary or due to similarity in lifestyles.
- **History of high cholesterol-** Having a history of high cholesterol can increase your risk of recurrence.

Since high cholesterol does not exhibit any symptoms, getting your cholesterol screened is important. According to the American Heart Association, it is recommended that adults 20 years or older with a low risk should have their cholesterol and traditional risk factors checked every four to six years. The frequency of cholesterol screens should increase for individuals that have a higher cardiovascular risk. Frequency of screenings, as well as overall treatment plans, will vary from person to person and should be provided by your doctor and care team.

While some risk factors of high cholesterol can be inherited, others can be brought about by lifestyle behaviors. While those can cause an increase in risk, there are behavior changes that can be made to help your cholesterol levels and reduce your risk, such as

incorporating a healthy eating pattern, engaging in physical activity, quitting smoking, and taking medications as prescribed. A healthy well- balanced eating pattern can vary but should include fruits, vegetables, grains, dairy, and protein; it should also be limited in saturated fat, trans fats, added sugars, and sodium. According to the Center for Disease Control, it is recommended that adults should aim for 150 minutes per week of moderate-intensity physical activity, such as brisk walking or biking, and include muscle strengthening activities at least two days per week, such as lifting weights or resistance training. By quitting smoking, individuals can help to lower their LDL or “bad” cholesterol and increase their HDL or “good” cholesterol. Lifestyle modifications can help lower cholesterol levels but individuals often need assistance to lower levels with prescription medications. These medications are important in your treatment plan and should be taken as prescribed.

To discuss your risk and ensure your cholesterol levels are within normal ranges contact your health care provider.