

Keep Calm and Control Your Cholesterol

September is National Cholesterol Awareness Month. Cholesterol is not bad in and of itself, as our body needs it to build cells and make vitamins and other hormones. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), cholesterol is a fat, or a lipid, that is found in your blood. High-density lipoprotein (HDL), commonly known as the "good" cholesterol, helps protect your heart, but low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or "bad" cholesterol, can clog the arteries of your heart. Having too much bad cholesterol, or not enough good cholesterol, is where problems can arise.

Ashley Lisek, an OSF HealthCare family medicine APN, discusses the risks of high cholesterol, and how to get and stay healthy.

Ashley Lisek, APN, Family Medicine, OSF HealthCare

"If you have high cholesterol, you could be at risk for having a stroke or a mini stroke – which we typically call a TIA. You could be at risk for having clogged arteries which then puts you at risk for coronary artery disease or heart disease. You also would have increased risk for diabetes." (:15)

So who is most at risk for having high cholesterol?

Ashley Lisek, APN, Family Medicine, OSF HealthCare

"Being older in age makes you more at risk for high cholesterol, along with your diet and lifestyle regimen. If you are eating a lot of fried, fatty, and processed foods that can increase your risk. Being African American can also increase your risk of high cholesterol – as well as having diabetes. Genetics is a factor to an extent. There is a component where it can be family-related. But a lot of it can also be minimized with not just medicine, but your lifestyle and eating habits." (:29)

High cholesterol typically has no symptoms until it is too late. However, the good news is that a simple blood test can check cholesterol levels – and Lisek recommends getting these blood tests annually. However, she also recommends talking to your primary care provider to discuss these tests and how frequently they recommend getting bloodwork done, as each person is different.

According to the FDA, your total cholesterol level should be 200mg/dL or less, your LDL values less than 100 mg/dL, and your HDL values greater or equal to 40 mg/dL. However, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 93 million adults in the U.S. who are age 20 or older have total cholesterol levels higher than 200 mg/Dl – and nearly 29 million adult Americans have total cholesterol levels higher than 240 mg/dL.³

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"We like to start lifestyle modifications when your total cholesterol starts to get elevated above that 200 level. If your triglycerides are elevated or your bad cholesterol is high, we like to address that sooner rather than later as well to minimize your risk of further diseases." (:15)

While fatty foods should be avoided to keep your cholesterol levels healthy, Lisek says to pay attention to good versus bad fats, as not all fats lead to poor cholesterol.

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"One of the things I commonly hear is 'I can't eat avocado or almonds because they are bad for me.' No they are not. Those are healthy fats and what we are saying to do is eat them in moderation. So avocado is different than guacamole. A lot of times people think that guacamole is considered avocado, but it's not. But eating those in moderation actually helps improve those healthy fats." (:21)

Although lifestyle modifications and an overall healthy lifestyle are the preferred routes to healthy cholesterol levels, some people have high bad cholesterol levels who do benefit from medication when a healthy lifestyle is not helping. The CDC describes familial hypercholesterolemia (FH) as a genetic condition that causes very high LDL cholesterol levels beginning at a young age, and if left untreated, these levels will continue to get worse. This greatly raises the risk for heart disease, heart attack, and stroke at a young age and medication may be the best route for these individuals.

Overall, preventative health is the key to getting your cholesterol levels under control before intervention is needed. To find a healthcare provider for you or a loved one, go to www.osfhealthcare.org.