

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

SERVING THE TOWNS OF BERLIN, ROCKY HILL AND WETHERSFIELD

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Check Your Blood Cholesterol Level

Are you worried about cholesterol? With all the warnings we see and hear in the media, many people have come to fear cholesterol and despair that they will have to give up all their favorite foods in order to be healthy. But cholesterol itself is not a villain. Given proper information and adopting a willingness to make some lifestyle changes, most people can keep their cholesterol level within the healthy range.

But what is cholesterol? Does it have any purpose besides clogging our arteries and causing heart attacks? The answer is yes. Cholesterol is a fat-like substance that is found naturally in our bodies; it is required to make hormones, vitamin D, and acids that help digest food. Usually, the body manufactures all the cholesterol it needs to function properly, but we often exceed the healthy amount of cholesterol because of the foods we eat or because we are not active enough.

There are two kinds of cholesterol: HDL (high density lipoprotein) and LDL (low density lipoprotein.) HDL keeps cholesterol from building up in the body by transporting the bad cholesterol (LDL) to the liver, where it can be processed and eventually eliminated from the body. When cholesterol is measured, higher numbers are desirable for HDL, and lower numbers are the goal for LDL.

When there is too much cholesterol in the body, the excess is deposited into the bloodstream and begins to build up in the arteries. This process is called atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries. When the build-up of cholesterol occurs in the coronary arteries, those arteries become narrow and may be blocked, resulting in chest pain and coronary heart disease. When the blood supply to the heart becomes completely cut off, a heart attack occurs.

The National Cholesterol Education Program recommends that healthy adults have their cholesterol levels checked once every 5 years. (People with certain conditions may require a cholesterol test more often.) Once diagnosed, high blood cholesterol can be reduced with “therapeutic lifestyle changes.” For some people, medication may also be required. While a person cannot change risk factors such as age, gender, race, and family history, there are several risk factors that can be controlled. These include

- Weight: Losing weight can lower LDL and triglyceride (another form of fat in the blood that increases the risk of heart disease) levels while raising HDL levels.
- Smoking: Cigarette smoking is related to high levels of LDL
- Exercise: Regular physical activity can raise HDL and lower LDL levels. It is recommended that everyone is physically active for at least 30 minutes most days of the week.
- Diet: Reducing dietary fat intake, especially saturated fat and cholesterol, and increasing dietary fiber will increase the HDL level.

Unhealthy levels of cholesterol can only be detected by testing. There are no symptoms associated with a

high cholesterol level itself. A simple blood test can give the levels for total blood cholesterol, HDL, LDL, and triglycerides.

Now is a good time to check your blood cholesterol level, since September is National Cholesterol Education Month. The Central Connecticut Health District, with funding from the Connecticut Department of Public Health, is sponsoring 3 free screening clinics for residents of Berlin, Rocky Hill, and Wethersfield in each of the three towns during the week of September 19th. Contact the Health District at 721-2822 for further information and to make an appointment (www.ccthd.org).

The National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute is an excellent source of information about blood cholesterol, including "Heart Healthy Recipes." Visit them on line at <http://hin.nhlbi.gov/cholmonth/recipes.htm>. Another good resource is the American Heart Association (www.americanheart.org), which can be reached at 1-800-242-8721.