Know Your Cholesterol Numbers

*Tammy Roberts, MS, RD, LD
Nutrition and Health Education Specialist

It is important for you to be aware of your cholesterol numbers because high cholesterol is one of the major controllable risk factors for coronary heart disease, heart attack and stroke.

When you get the results of your cholesterol blood test you should know your total cholesterol, HDL cholesterol and LDL cholesterol.

Low density lipoprotein or LDL is considered a good gauge for risk of heart attack and stroke. It is the LDL, along with other substances, that builds up on artery walls forming a thick plaque that narrows arteries and makes them less flexible. When a clot forms and blocks an artery a heart attack or stroke can be the result.

High density lipoprotein or HDL is also referred to as the good cholesterol. High levels of HDL can provide some protection against heart attack and stroke. HDL helps to keep the LDL from building up on artery walls.

There are some things that impact cholesterol that we have no control over. They include age and heredity. Cholesterol levels increase as we age. High cholesterol tends to run in families. There just isn’t anything you can do to change your genes.

You can control your diet, weight and physical activity and all can impact your cholesterol numbers. Watch saturated fat, trans fat and dietary cholesterol. The body makes cholesterol from saturated and trans fats. Saturated fats are found in foods such as high fat meat, cheese, milk and butter. Food labels must list amounts of trans and saturated fats. Eat as little as possible. Being overweight can increase your cholesterol numbers and is also a risk factor for heart disease. Be sure to get 30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week.

Everyone over the age of 20 should have their cholesterol checked at least every five years; more often if you have high cholesterol or are at risk for heart disease.

Desirable Total Cholesterol Level is 200 mg/dL or Below

It is optimal for LDL to be below 129 mg/dL for people not at risk for heart disease and less than 100 mg/dL for those at risk for heart disease.

For men, the average HDL reading is 40-50 mg/dL. In women, it is 50-60 mg/dL. Less than 40 for men and 50 for women puts you at a higher risk for heart disease. Above 60 mg/dL provides protection against heart disease.

The Creative Living Newsletter is a partnership among the Guadalupe Center, the Kansas Department on Aging, and University of Missouri Extension. If you have any suggestions for its content, please contact Nina Chen, Ph.D., Human Development Specialist, 816-252-5051.

*Spanish translation provided by Kelly Loeb, MSW through support of the Kansas Department on Aging.