

## Checking Cholesterol Pays Long-Term Dividends

By Dr. Lori Whitaker

We Americans are trying to cut more fat and cholesterol out of our diets. *We are. We really are.* But the rate of heart disease is going up and our waistlines are expanding. Each year there are 1,260,000 new and recurrent heart attacks in this country. That should get us thinking.

Just as you plan for your long term financial well-being, you should plan for your long term physical well-being. Talking with your doctor about cholesterol—when to get it checked and what you can do to lower it—can pay long-term dividends for your health and the health of your loved ones.

At the [Puget Sound Health Alliance](#), we have a checklist of questions you can use to start the conversation with your physician. Go to [www.wacommunitycheckup.org](http://www.wacommunitycheckup.org), click on “resources” and access “Talking to Your Doctor.”

And, yes, two of the issues you’ll want to discuss involve exercise and diet. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, high cholesterol affects over 65 million Americans. It is a serious condition that increases your risk for heart disease, stroke and other vascular diseases.

The higher your cholesterol level, the greater risk you have of developing some form of cardiovascular disease. You can have high cholesterol and not know it. Keeping your cholesterol at a healthy level lessens your risk for developing heart disease and reduces the chance of having a heart attack or stroke.

So how does cholesterol cause heart disease? When there is too much cholesterol, which can be described as a fat-like substance in your blood, it builds up in the walls of your arteries.

Over time, this buildup causes the arteries to harden, and narrows the space for blood to flow, which slows or completely blocks the flow of blood to your heart. That’s when a heart attack happens. Similar blockages can occur in arteries to the brain, kidneys or legs.

Health young adults should have their cholesterol levels checked every five years or so. People over age 50, and those with known high cholesterol, heart disease or diabetes should have their levels checked more often. A blood test called a “lipid profile” can help you find out your cholesterol numbers.

What do the levels mean? Total cholesterol is only part of the picture. What really matters are the *types* of cholesterol and other lipids in your bloodstream.

LDL (bad) cholesterol is the main source of cholesterol buildup and blockage in the arteries.

HDL (good) cholesterol helps to clear cholesterol from the arteries—so the higher the better.

Triglycerides are fats that are transported in the blood after a meal.

Let's be clear: Prevention is the foundation of individual health. And, the foundation of prevention is your personal lifestyle habits. To keep your cholesterol level as healthy as possible, your lifestyle should include:

- A low fat diet (*trans* and saturated fats are especially bad);
- An activity level that provides for 30 to 60 minutes of exercise most days of the week; and,
- Striving to keep your weight in a range that you and your doctor decide is best for you.

There are times when lifestyle is not enough to keep your cholesterol at a healthy level. This is because cholesterol levels and lipid levels are the result of personal lifestyle choices *and* genetic make-up. If you have a healthy lifestyle and your cholesterol is still high, talk with your doctor about additional steps you can take.

The Puget Sound Health Alliance's *Community Checkup* shows just how far we in King, Snohomish, Pierce, Thurston and Kitsap counties have to go when it comes to testing for cholesterol. It shows that one in four people age 18 to 75 in the hospital for a heart procedure didn't have their cholesterol tested. Getting that cholesterol screening is important to determine if additional lifestyle changes and possibly medication are needed.

At [www.wacommunitycheckup.org](http://www.wacommunitycheckup.org), you can actually see data on how your local hospital or clinic measures up in testing for "good" cholesterol, "bad" cholesterol, blood pressure, the prescription of cholesterol-lowering drugs and beta-blockers.

Basically, what we have learned from the first three rounds of *Community Checkup* data is that all of us – you, doctors like me, hospitals, medical clinics, insurers, employers, other health care personnel – have to work together to help reduce the risk of cholesterol and heart disease.

Talk with your doctor about cholesterol levels and what you can do to bring them down!

*(Dr. Lori Whitaker is a practicing family physician who provides consultation to the Puget Sound Health Alliance)*