

## Watching your Cholesterol in the New Year

By Jackie Barney, RN, CNP

With the start of the New Year, many people make resolutions for healthier living. Along with goals of eating a balanced diet and exercising more, have you thought about watching your cholesterol levels in 2009?

Here in the Family Practice Department at the Duluth Clinic-Superior, I talk to many patients who are surprised to learn they have high cholesterol. There's a myth that you have to be overweight before worrying about cholesterol – but high lipid levels can affect people of all shapes and sizes.

If you have an annual physical, that's a good time to get your cholesterol checked. There are three numbers to know:

**HDL (high-density lipoprotein):** To help patients remember what this means, I call it the “hero” cholesterol. We want this number to be greater than 40.

**LDL (low-density lipoprotein):** This is the “loser” cholesterol. A number less than 100 is optimal. If you are diabetic, it should be less than 70.

**Triglycerides:** This level should be less than 190 for good health.

The “good” cholesterol helps to maintain blood vessel health. But too much of the “bad” cholesterol can cause the buildup of plaque in the blood vessels, which can lead to high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke.

When patients are diagnosed with unhealthy cholesterol levels, we discuss ways they can improve their cholesterol through diet and exercise. We often give patients three to six months to make important lifestyle changes, before considering a medication. That includes a recommendation for at least 30 minutes of exercise, seven days a week.

If your HDL levels are low, you can take fish oil supplements. Be sure to look for “distilled” or “mercury-free” on the label. Also, monounsaturated fats, like olive oil, can help to improve your HDLs.

Problem LDL levels also can be helped by diet changes. High cholesterol foods come from animal products like dairy, meat, and eggs. You can make simple substitutions like chicken or fish instead of beef. Incorporate olive oil into your diet, rather than butter. Go for a bowl of oatmeal in the morning, instead of bacon and eggs. Try an egg substitute, like Egg Beaters.

We can connect patients with a dietitian, who will help them to evaluate their current diet and suggest a new plan. I've seen patients who have worked hard at their diet and exercise, and it really can make a difference in improving cholesterol levels.

Not everyone needs medication, but it can be very helpful for some patients. There are many prescription cholesterol medications that are less expensive as well. Your physician will choose the one that is most cost-effective and works best for you.

Risk factors for high cholesterol include obesity, chronic health conditions like diabetes, and your family history. If you're concerned about your cholesterol levels, you don't have to wait for your annual appointment. You can set up a time to see a nurse practitioner to make sure you have healthy cholesterol in 2009.

*Jackie Barney is a nurse practitioner in the Family Medicine Department at the Duluth Clinic-Superior, part of St. Mary's Hospital of Superior.*