

Why Blood Cholesterol Matters

Blood cholesterol plays an important part in deciding a person's chance or risk of getting coronary heart disease (CHD). The higher your blood cholesterol level, the greater your risk. That's why high blood cholesterol is called a risk factor for heart disease. Did you know that heart disease is the number one killer of men and of women in the United States? About a half million people die each year from heart attacks caused by CHD. Altogether 1.25 million heart attacks occur each year in the United States.

Even if your blood cholesterol level is close to the desirable range, you can lower it and reduce your risk of getting heart disease. Eating in a heart-healthy way, being physically active, and losing weight if you are overweight are things everyone can do to help lower their levels. This fact sheet will show you how. But first, a few things you ought to know . . .

The Blood Cholesterol--Heart Disease Connection

When you have too much cholesterol in your blood, the excess builds up on the walls of the arteries that carry blood to the heart. This buildup is called "arteriosclerosis" or "hardening of the arteries." It narrows the arteries and can slow down or block blood flow to the heart. With less blood, the heart gets less oxygen. With not enough oxygen to the heart, there may be chest pain ("angina" or "angina pectoris"), heart attack ("myocardial infarction"), or even death. Cholesterol buildup is the most common cause of heart disease, and it happens so slowly that you are not even aware of it. The higher your blood cholesterol, the greater your chance of this buildup.