

Ask the nurse: Age and cholesterol



Liz Helden is a nurse lipid specialist at the Pediatric Lipid Clinic at Chedoke-McMaster Hospital at the Hamilton Health Sciences Centre in Hamilton, Ontario.

Dear Liz,

Q. At what age should I start to think about my cholesterol?

Signed,

Cholesterol Conscious

A. You can change many things about yourself, but unfortunately, age is a non-modifiable risk factor for heart disease. As you get older, your risk for heart disease and stroke will increase, as well as the likelihood for developing a problem with your cholesterol. To be healthy, everyone needs a certain amount of cholesterol in their blood, but no matter how old you are, abnormal levels of cholesterol will increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

The most recent Canadian recommendations suggest that men over the age of 40 and women who are post-

menopausal, or over the age of 50, should have their blood cholesterol levels checked. In addition, if you have diabetes, a history of heart disease or stroke, high blood pressure, if you smoke or are obese, you should have your cholesterol tested regularly by your physician. In relation to age, family medical history is very important. If you have a family history of early onset heart disease or stroke, or if someone in your family has abnormal cholesterol levels, it is recommended to have your blood cholesterol levels evaluated.

Fortunately, there are 'modifiable' aspects of your lifestyle that can help control or reduce your cholesterol. Health Canada recommends reducing your fat intake by eating leaner meats, poultry and fish. It is wise to avoid foods containing high levels of saturated or trans fats. Also, make sure to include plenty of vegetables, fruits and whole grains in your diet. Although being careful about what you eat is important, physical activity is also essential. Being active – exercising 30 to 60 minutes at least four days per week – may improve your cholesterol levels.

For some, diet and exercise may not be enough to reduce cholesterol to target levels and medication may be required. If you are on medication to control your high cholesterol, make sure to take it as prescribed by your physician. And remember, if you take medication, it is still important to maintain a healthy lifestyle, one that includes a healthy diet and exercise, and have your cholesterol checked regularly.

It is never too early to think about your cholesterol levels. Speak with your physician about having your cholesterol tested and how to properly manage it.

If you would like more information on cholesterol and heart health, visit www.makingtheconnection.ca or call toll-free 1-877-4LOW-LDL (1-877-456-9535).

Understanding adult onset diabetes

Many Canadians have type 2 diabetes and don't know it. Ninety per cent of people with diabetes have type 2 and it often develops in overweight and inactive adults. The good news is that type 2 diabetes may be prevented or delayed with a combination of good nutrition and physical activity.

If you are over the age of 40, it is important to be tested every three years. Other considerations that may indicate you need to be tested for diabetes are if you have a parent, brother or sister with diabetes, have high blood pressure or high cholesterol, or are overweight.

People who are at risk for developing diabetes should make sure they eat a healthy diet, maintain a healthy body weight and get daily exercise. Speak to a physician about your risk factors and the modifications you can make to reduce your chance of developing diabetes.

For more information on diabetes and age, visit www.makingtheconnection.ca or www.diabetes.ca.