

## TREATING HIGH CHOLESTEROL LEVELS

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If your child's cholesterol level is high or borderline high, start the programs listed in this information sheet. (If your child's cholesterol level is normal, it still would be a good idea to place your family on the same programs.) High cholesterol levels are not the only risk factor for coronary heart disease (CHD). The following risk factors are just as harmful as being on a high-cholesterol diet: physical inactivity, obesity, and smoking. The more risk factors that you and your child have, the higher the risk of CHD. Living a long and healthy life requires healthy eating and exercise patterns. It is easier to start these habits as a child than to have to adopt them as an adult. Review with your family the following ways to reduce cholesterol levels. If you already are carrying out the majority of these recommendations, you are protecting your child's heart and blood vessels.

### **A LOW-FAT DIET:**

The American Heart Association recommends that all children over 2 years of age be on a low-cholesterol, low-saturated fat diet. Currently, most Americans take in 40% of their daily calories as fat. A healthy (prudent) diet keeps fat to 30% of total calories. The goal is eating fat in moderation, not eliminating fat entirely. Lowering your child's fat intake to 30% of daily calories carries no risk for children over 2 years old. (None of the following recommendations apply to children less than 2 years.) Foods of plant origin, such as fruits, vegetables, and grains, do not contain cholesterol. Foods of animal origin, such as meats, eggs, and milk products, do contain cholesterol. Our blood cholesterol is raised by consuming cholesterol itself or by eating saturated fats that stimulate the production of cholesterol. Even without any fat intake, the liver produces a small amount of cholesterol each day. Therefore, we will always have a blood cholesterol level. Serving a low-fat diet in your house is rather easy:

- Serve more fish, turkey, and chicken, since they have less fat than red meats. Buy lean ground beef for hamburgers. Use lean ham or turkey for sandwiches.
- Trim the fat from meats and remove the skin from poultry before eating.
- Avoid the meats with the highest fat content, such as bacon, sausages, salami, pepperoni, and hot dogs.
- Limit the number of eggs eaten to three or four per week.
- Use 1% or skim (0.5%) milk instead of whole milk (which is 3.5% fat).
- Avoid deep-fat fried food or food fried in butter or fat.
- Increase your child's fiber intake. Fiber is found in most grains, vegetables, and fruits.

### **FAMILY EXERCISE PROGRAM:**

Exercise is an excellent way to lower cholesterol levels. Your goal should be 20 to 30 minutes of vigorous exercise three times per week. Vigorous exercise must involve the large muscles of the legs and cause your heart to beat faster (aerobic exercise). Vigorous exercise also improves your heart's response to work. A child is much more likely to exercise if you exercise with him. Encourage your child to try the following forms of exercise:

- Walk or bike instead of riding in a car.
- Use stairs instead of elevators.
- Take the dog for a walk, jump rope, or play ball if bored.
- Join a team (such as soccer) or learn a new sport (such as roller skating) that requires vigorous (aerobic) activity. Swimming and jogging are sports that burn lots of calories. Sports such as baseball and football do not exercise the heart.
- Exercise to a videotape or music.
- Limit television and video game time to 2 hours or less per day. These sitting activities interfere with physical fitness.
- Use an exercise bike, dance, or run in place while watching television.
- Support better physical education programs and aerobics classes in your schools.

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**IDEAL BODY WEIGHT:**

Children who are overweight tend to have higher cholesterol levels. Helping your child return to ideal body weight will improve the blood cholesterol levels. Decreasing fat in a person's diet automatically decreases the calories as the same amount of protein or carbohydrates. A low-fat diet *and* exercise are the key ingredients for losing weight. If your child is overweight, also request information on weight loss.

**SMOKE-FREE HOME:**

A good way to enhance good cholesterol levels is to stop smoking. Also avoid exposing your child to passive smoking. If someone in your home has a problem with smoking, request stop-smoking information.

**SETTING A GOOD EXAMPLE:**

If your child needs to lower his cholesterol level, he will need help from his family. You cannot put him on a special diet without putting the entire family on it. You cannot put him on a special exercise program without having other family members participate. Eat healthy foods and snacks, so your child will eat similarly. Play more sports and watch fewer television sports shows - as you would like your child to do.

**MEDICATIONS TO LOWER CHOLESTEROL:**

Medications to lower cholesterol are rarely used in children unless they have a rare form of high cholesterol related to disease rather than diet. If your child's level remains high despite your initial efforts, request a consultation with a nutritionist regarding special diets. Also, join an exercise program at a local gym or fitness center. These additional steps will usually help your child.

**WHEN TO RECHECK YOUR CHILD'S CHOLESTEROL LEVEL:**

Generally, for high cholesterol levels (above the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile), the level is rechecked approximately 2 to 4 months after starting a program to lower it. If the cholesterol level is borderline high (above the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile), it is usually rechecked yearly.