Understanding Your Cholesterol

High Cholesterol

High cholesterol is a condition where there is too much cholesterol in the blood. High cholesterol levels can be reduced through diet and lifestyle changes as well as lipid-lowering medication if necessary. Left untreated, high cholesterol can lead to heart disease, stroke and other cardiovascular diseases.

Hyperlipidemia

Hyperlipidemia is a condition in which there are too many lipids (fats) in the blood. Hyperlipidemia is commonly associated with high cholesterol and may be reduced through regular physical activity and healthy eating.

Hypertriglyceridemia

Hypertriglyceridemia is a high level of triglycerides in the blood. A high triglyceride level combined with low HDL ("good") cholesterol or high LDL ("bad") cholesterol seems to speed up the gathering of plaque in the arteries. A normal triglyceride level is less than 150 mg/dL. Hypertriglyceridemia has been linked to coronary artery disease.

HDL Cholesterol

High-density lipoprotein cholesterol is known as "good" cholesterol, because high levels of HDL seem to protect against heart attacks. Low levels of HDL seem to increase the risk of heart disease. Medical experts think HDL tends to carry cholesterol away from the arteries and back to the liver, where it's passed from the body. Some experts believe HDL removes excess cholesterol from arterial plaque, slowing its buildup.

LDL Cholesterol

Low-density lipoprotein is known as "bad" cholesterol. When too much LDL circulates in the blood, it can slowly build up in the inner walls of the arteries that feed the heart and brain. Together with other substances, it can form plaque, a thick, hard deposit that can narrow the arteries and make them less flexible. This condition is known as atherosclerosis. If a clot forms from the rupture of plaque in the wall of a blood vessel, the clot can block or narrow blood flow in the artery and cause heart attack or stroke.

If you have high blood pressure, high cholesterol or a history of heart problems, you have a higher risk of heart attack and stroke. You can lower your risk by making small changes. Here are a few suggestions:

▸ **Eat more whole grains, fruits and vegetables.** These fiber-packed foods help to lower "bad" LDL cholesterol. Try to eat these foods at each meal.

▸ **Eat more seeds, nuts, beans and legumes.**

▸ **Include healthier fats.** Unsaturated fats such as canola, olive and peanut oils are less likely than butter or lard to clog your arteries. Eat fish that is high in omega-3 fatty acids including albacore tuna, salmon and sardines. Omega-3s seem to lower triglycerides, fight plaque in your arteries, lower blood pressure and reduce your risk of abnormal heart rhythms.

▸ **Eat lean proteins.** Beans, nuts, fish and chicken are your staples. The American Heart Association suggests you eat at least two 3.5 ounce servings of fish a week. Not all cuts of meat are the same, so make sure to look for leaner choices.

▸ **Structure your meals.** When you skip a meal, you are more likely to overeat later. Eating regular meals and snacks helps to control blood sugars and regulate metabolism.

▸ **Spice it up.** Try using dried herbs and spices instead of salt, which can increase blood pressure. For chicken, try using rosemary, garlic or sage. For fish, try dill or tarragon. Vinegars are another way to liven up food.

▸ **Celebrate every pound lost.** Small steps add up. Losing 5 to 10 pounds can cut your risk of having a heart attack or stoke by lowering your blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels.

▸ **Exercise.** Be as active as you can to strengthen your heart, improve blood flow, raise "good' HDL cholesterol, and helps to control blood sugar and weight.

▸ **No butts about it.** Research shows that quitting smoking, no matter how long you have been smoking, works as well if not better than any heart drug available. Quitting will lower your risk of death from heart disease by 33 percent.

Sources:
National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute
The American Heart Association
Center for Disease Control: "Losing Weight"