

Number, please?

The important diet-cholesterol connection

By Hildy Pearl
special writer

WHAT ARE YOU going to say the next time someone asks "What is your number?" If you are like a growing number of people, your number is your blood cholesterol level.

Why should you know your number? Because the evidence is in. According to the National Institute of Health, "... It has been established beyond a reasonable doubt that lowering elevated blood cholesterol levels ... will reduce the risk of heart disease."

The newest guidelines recommend that adults aim for cholesterol levels below 200 mg/dl and levels less than 180 mg/dl be considered ideal. Now that you know what to do about your cholesterol level, it is important to know how to lower it, or if it's already at a good level, to keep it there.

Your first line of defense is to choose the right foods. There is a lot of information out there on diet and cho-

lesterol ... some good, some not so good. Sorting out this information can be a challenge.

The general guidelines call for limiting total calories from fat to 30 percent or less. This means limiting saturated fat to 10 percent, increasing polyunsaturated fat to 10 percent and monounsaturated fat to 10 percent. Dietary cholesterol should be a maximum of 300 mg. per day.

YOU NEED TO KNOW not only what types of foods to eat, but how to buy food in the grocery store without being lured by a misleading label. In fact, the dietitians who teach "The Cholesterol Connection" for Health Development Network of Botsford General Hospital believe this to be crucial in learning about "heart healthy" eating.

To help you accomplish this, let's take a mental tour of your typical grocery store. As you enter, you are likely to first go to the fresh produce section. Most fresh fruits and vegetables are ideal on a "heart healthy" eating plan.

They are low in fat and high in fiber. One bonus of choosing fruits is that the fiber they contain, called pectin, has been shown to lower blood cholesterol levels. Watch out for avocados which are a rich source of fat and coconuts which are high in saturated fat.

Next, you approach the dairy section. A frequent misconception is that people on cholesterol lowering diets should eliminate dairy products. This is simply not true. Dairy products are a great source of many nutrients, especially calcium and should not be excluded in a well-balanced diet.

It is true, however, that many dairy products are high in fat and cholesterol. But skim or low fat varieties of milk, cheese, yogurt and even sour cream are available. Eggs are often found in the dairy section. Egg whites are fine, but the yolk is very high in cholesterol and should be limited to two per week.

MARGARINES AND butters can be another confusing lot. Margarine should be chosen over butter, but not

all margarines are created equal when it comes to a cholesterol-lowering diet. Even if it is labeled "contains no cholesterol," the margarine can still be high in saturated fat and saturated fats raise blood cholesterol. Choose margarines which have "liquid oil" listed first on the label and/or those which have two times the amount of polyunsaturated fat as saturated fat.

The deli section can be a challenge to the "heart healthy" consumer. Avoid processed meats like salami, bologna and other luncheon meats. These are loaded with fat and sodium. Also, beware of "salads" which are prepared with mayonnaise and other salad dressings and oils.

The cookie and cracker aisle presents a challenge. Many commercially prepared cookies and crackers are high in fat. Don't be misled by a label reading "all natural" or "made with 100 percent vegetable fat." Look for the word "hydrogenated." This indicates that the fat used in that product has been chemically changed from an unsaturated fat into a saturated fat. Additionally, coconut oil, palm oil and palm kernel oil are vegetable oils that are highly saturated and should be avoided.

When shopping for processed, dried, canned or frozen foods, choose those which are low in fat. Only 30 percent of your total calories should from fat. Read the label. Find the number of grams of fat in the food and multiply by 9 calories/gram. Divide this into the total calories in the food to get the percent of fat calories. Try to choose those with lower than 30 percent fat calories.

When a label says "contains no cholesterol," the food may or may not be good on a "Heart healthy" diet. First of all, only animal products contain cholesterol. Often a food label such as one on peanut butter will state that it "contains no cholesterol." So what. Peanut butter never contained any cholesterol. Peanut butter is high in fat and can contain hydrogenated fat (saturated) and therefore should be limited.

WHEN SHOPPING FOR meats, choose lean varieties, choose chicken without the skin and lean cuts of meat. Substitute turkey for veal in many recipes. Fatty beef, lamb, ribs and sausages are out. Fish and shellfish are excellent choices. Not only are they low in fat, but they contain a form of fat that can lower blood cholesterol levels.

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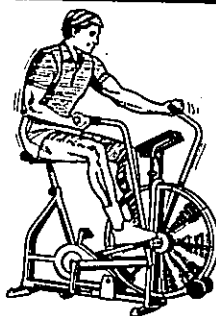
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