What You Need to Know About Cholesterol

What is cholesterol?
- Cholesterol is a waxy substance. Your liver makes cholesterol. It is also in certain foods like meat, eggs, dairy products, and cheese. Your body needs some cholesterol, but your liver makes all that you need. Too much cholesterol in the body builds up in the arteries. This causes “hardening of the arteries” and can narrow the opening in your arteries. This narrowing means that less blood can get through an artery. If an artery in your heart becomes too narrow, you can have a heart attack. If an artery in the brain becomes too narrow, you can have a stroke.

Types of cholesterol
- There are two types of cholesterol. Low-density (LDL) is known as the “bad” cholesterol. Too much LDL can lead to heart disease. High-density (HDL) is known as the “good” cholesterol. HDL gives some protection against heart disease.

What determines your cholesterol level?
- What you can’t change
  - Your genes. High cholesterol levels can run in families.

- What you can change-
  - Your lifestyle - the foods you eat, how active you are.
  - Being overweight or obese is linked to higher cholesterol levels and higher levels of “bad” cholesterol.
  - Eating foods high in saturated and trans fats can increase your cholesterol levels.
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- Being active also helps to increase the levels of “good” cholesterol.

What can you do?
- Most people with high cholesterol do not have any symptoms. Talk with your provider about when and how often you should have your cholesterol level checked.

- Eat a diet low in saturated and trans fats. Choose lean cuts of meat or fish. Eat turkey or chicken without the skin. Choose low-fat cheeses, milk products, and other dairy products. Avoid fried foods.

- Eat more fruits and vegetables – fresh, frozen, or canned, but avoid sauces and heavy syrups.

- Eat a diet high in whole grains and fiber.

- Be physically active. Aim for 150-minutes of moderate physical activity each week, in at least 10 minute blocks. If you haven’t been active, talk with your provider before you start. Remember to start slowly.

Maintain a healthy weight.
Being overweight or obese can increase your cholesterol levels. Losing weight and maintaining a healthy weight can help to decrease your “bad” cholesterol level and increase your “good” cholesterol. Talk to your health care team about the MOVE! Weight Management Program for Veterans. MOVE! can help you lose weight and keep it off. Visit the MOVE! Web site at www.move.va.gov for information.