UNDERSTANDING CHOLESTEROL

WHAT IS CHOLESTEROL

Cholesterol is a waxy substance found in your blood. Your body needs cholesterol to build healthy cells, but high levels of cholesterol can increase your risk of heart disease. High cholesterol can develop fatty deposits in the blood vessels, which eventually these deposits grow and make it difficult for blood to flow through the arteries. This can form clots, which may cause heart attach or stroke.

RISK FACTORS

Factors that can increase your risk of unhealthy cholesterol levels include:

- Poor diet. Eating too much saturated fat or trans fats can result in unhealthy cholesterol levels. Saturated fats are found in fatty cuts of meat and full-fat dairy products. Trans fats are often found in packaged snacks or desserts.
- Obesity. Having a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or greater puts you at risk of high cholesterol.
- Lack of exercise. Exercise helps boost your body's HDL, the "good," cholesterol.
- Smoking. Cigarette smoking may lower your level of HDL, the "good," cholesterol.
- Alcohol. Drinking too much alcohol can increase your total cholesterol level.
- Age. Even young children can have unhealthy cholesterol, but it's much more common in people over 40. As you age, your liver becomes less able to remove LDL cholesterol.

PREVENTION

The same heart-healthy lifestyle changes that can lower your cholesterol can help prevent you from having high cholesterol in the first place. To help prevent high cholesterol, you can:

- Eat a low-salt diet that emphasizes fruits, vegetables and whole grains
- Limit the amount of animal fats and use good fats in moderation
- Lose extra pounds and maintain a healthy weight
- Quit smoking
- Exercise on most days of the week for at least 30 minutes
- Drink alcohol in moderation, if at all
- Manage stress