September is National Cholesterol Education Month. It is estimated that one in six adult Americans have high cholesterol. High cholesterol does not have symptoms and many people do not know their cholesterol level. That’s why it’s important to know your cholesterol level and schedule regular visits with your doctor.

Why should you know your cholesterol level?
Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that your body needs. But, when you have too much in your blood, it can build up on the walls of your arteries. High blood cholesterol is one of the major risk factors for heart disease. The higher your blood cholesterol level, the greater your risk for developing heart disease or having a heart attack. If you have other risk factors, such as diabetes or high blood pressure, the risk increases even more. Heart disease is the number one killer of women and men in the United States.

Who should have their cholesterol checked?
Everyone age 20 and older should have their cholesterol measured at least once every 5 years. A blood test called “lipoprotein profile” is done after a 9 to 12 hour fast.

- **Total cholesterol level** – Optimal level is less than 200mg/dL
- **LDL (bad) cholesterol** – The main source of cholesterol buildup and blockage in the arteries – Optimal level is less than 100mg/dL
- **HDL (good) cholesterol** – Helps keep cholesterol from building up in the arteries – Levels of 60mg/dL or more help lower your risk for heart disease
- **Triglycerides** – The most common type of fat in your body – Normal level is less than 150mg/Dl

There are risk factors that you cannot do anything about that affect your cholesterol level. These include:
- **Age** – As men and women get older, their cholesterol level rises.
- **Heredity** – Your genes partly determine how much cholesterol your body makes. High blood cholesterol can run in families.

Good News from the AHA
The good news is that there are a variety of lifestyle related behaviors and activities that you can control and help your cholesterol levels. The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends:
- **Eat a heart-healthy diet.** A great way to help your cholesterol level is to include vegetables, fruits, whole grains, high-fiber foods, lean meats and poultry, fish at least twice a week and low or fat free dairy products into your nutritional plan.
- **Get moving.** Include at least 30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week.
- **Avoid tobacco smoke.** Smoking injures blood vessels and speeds up the hardening of the arteries. Smoking greatly increases a person’s risk for heart disease and stroke. Everyone should avoid exposure to secondhand smoke.

Cooking tips from the AHA
- Select lean cuts of meat, with minimal visible fat.
- Buy “choice” or “select” grades rather than “prime.” Select lean or extra lean ground beef.
- Trim visible fat from meat before cooking.
- Limit processed meats such as sausage, bologna, salami, and hot dogs. Many processed meats are high in calories, saturated fats, and sodium. Read labels carefully and choose such meats occasionally.
- Broil rather than pan-fry meats such as hamburger, lamb chops, pork chops, and steak.
- Use a rack to drains off fat when broiling, roasting or baking.

Lifestyle behavior changes may not be enough to help lower blood cholesterol. Everyone is different, so work with your doctor to find a treatment plan that’s best for you. Check out the American Heart Association website for more information on cholesterol education, heart disease prevention, nutrition, and physical activity recommendations for adults and children.

* Information provided is based on content and recommendations from www.cdc.gov, www.nhlbi.nih.gov and www.heart.org. It is for educational purposed only. Ascension does not provide medical care, diagnosis, or treatment.