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Get to the Heart of the Matter

*Learn the numbers to know to ensure a healthy heart for life by attending
Woodland Heights annual Heart Fair*

Many of us begin the New Year with a bang: health resolutions, new habits and good intentions – and after a few weeks, it's not unusual to lose momentum and slack off on your newly adopted exercise regime or diet. Then, there's that pesky chocolate holiday in February to contend with.

Each year, the American Heart Association designates February as Heart Health Month. What better time to brush up on your knowledge about being kind to your heart? Certain routine tests provide valuable information about your health outlook and help you know how to best care for your heart: blood pressure, cholesterol level, and waist circumference.

Blood pressure

Your blood pressure measures the force of blood pressing against the arteries as your heart pumps blood. It is represented by two numbers: the systolic and diastolic. Your systolic pressure is the measurement of pressure while your heart is pumping blood, and diastolic pressure refers to your heart's pressure at rest.

A normal blood pressure reading is a systolic (top) number under 120 mmHg and a diastolic (bottom) number under 80 mmHg. Prehypertension – a condition of elevated risk for high blood pressure – refers to blood pressure readings between 120-139 (systolic) and 80-89 (diastolic). Prehypertension can be managed with diet, exercise and medication, but can also advance to full-blown hypertension: 140-59 over 90-99 mmHg.

According to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, about one in three U.S. adults have high blood pressure. And, because high blood pressure has no symptoms, many people have the condition for years without knowing it. That's why it's important to know your blood pressure so that you can make appropriate lifestyle choices and, if necessary, begin treating the condition with medication. Left untreated, high blood pressure can damage your heart, blood vessels, kidneys and other organs. It can lead to coronary artery disease, heart failure, stroke, kidney failure, and other serious health conditions.

Blood pressure also rises with age. Men over age 45 and women over age 55 have an increased risk of hypertension. Other factors, such as your ethnic background, a family history of high blood pressure, or being overweight or obese, can elevate your risk. There are other risks for high blood pressure that you can control, such as avoiding high-sodium foods, smoking, excessive use of alcohol, and getting regular exercise.

Cholesterol level

Keeping the heart and blood healthy go hand-in-hand – the level of cholesterol in the blood is a major factor in your heart health. Cholesterol is a naturally occurring substance in the blood that is necessary for producing cell membranes and certain hormones, and supporting other body functions. Its bad reputation comes from the health problems that occur when there is too much cholesterol in the blood. High blood cholesterol is a primary risk factor in heart disease and stroke.

Approximately 75 percent of the cholesterol in our blood is produced in our bodies, and 25 percent from the food we eat. Your genetic background determines the amount of cholesterol your body produces. A blood test ordered by your doctor will measure the total blood cholesterol, low-density lipoprotein (LDL, also known as “bad” cholesterol), high-density lipoprotein (HDL, also known as “good” cholesterol), and triglycerides. A total cholesterol level of less than 200 mg/dL is desirable; 200 to 239 mg/dL is considered borderline high; and 240 mg/dL or above is considered high blood cholesterol. According to the AHA, a total cholesterol of 240 mg/dL and up more than doubles the risk of heart disease.

In addition to your total cholesterol score, it’s important to know how your numbers add up. A high HDL number – above 60 mg/dL – is considered ideal, as this protects against heart disease. An LDL cholesterol level of less than 100 mg/dL is optimal, but levels of 100-129 mg/dL are also acceptable. The ideal LDL score varies from person to person, depending on your genetic background and other risk factors for heart disease or diabetes. In recent years, physicians have discovered that in patients with existing coronary artery disease, an LDL number below 70 will reduce the risk of progression of disease.

The American Heart Association recommends that all adults age 20 and over have a cholesterol test at least every five years. Your physician may test your cholesterol more frequently if you have high cholesterol or risk factors.

Waist size

A slender waist is not just a matter of looking good, but also maintaining good health. Numerous studies have linked waist size with heart health. People who carry fat around the waist – an “apple” shape as opposed to a “pear” shape – are more likely to develop health problems than those with extra weight in the hips and thighs, even if their body mass index falls in the “normal” range. Guidelines published by National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, in cooperation with the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Disease set a healthy waist limit of 35 inches for women and 40 inches for men.

Extra weight around the middle raises your risk of a variety of other conditions, in addition to heart disease: diabetes, high blood pressure, stroke, cancer, sleep apnea, liver disease, gallbladder disease and osteoarthritis.

To measure your waist circumference, place a tape measure around your bare abdomen just above your hipbone. The tape should be snug (without pressing inward on the skin) and your stomach should be relaxed.

To learn more about these important numbers, plan to attend the Woodland Heights Medical Center Heart Fair on Saturday, February 6, 2010 from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. at the Lufkin Mall – Sears Court. In addition the many healthcare vendors, Woodland Heights will be providing free lipid profile screenings, which checks total cholesterol, triglycerides, HDL cholesterol and LDL cholesterol. The Heart Institute will be providing free blood pressure checks. Mini-seminars will be held at the following times in the Party Room (near the Sears Court):

- 8:30 a.m. Diabetes: What you should know
- 9:00 a.m. Cholesterol: The good, the bad, and the ugly

9:30 a.m. Cardiac Rehab: What is it and why is it important?
10:00 a.m. Fitness for the Heart
10:30 a.m. Diabetes: What you should know

Visit www.woodlandheights.net to learn more about the Heart Fair and click on the Health Resources link to learn more about blood pressure, cholesterol and other heart healthy advice to keep your loved ones and yourself as healthy as possible.

About Woodland Heights Medical Center

Established in 1918, Woodland Heights Medical Center was Lufkin's first hospital. Now, nine decades later, Woodland Heights is recognized throughout Deep East Texas as the leading provider of high quality, innovative health care services. Accommodating a wide range of clinical specialties, Woodland Heights has achieved excellence in key medical and surgical areas including cardiology, pulmonology, neurology, orthopedic surgery, physical medicine/rehabilitation, vascular surgery and obstetrics and gynecology. Woodland Heights also offers a full range of outpatient diagnostic services including advanced imaging, laboratory, outpatient surgery and emergency services. Through its Rehabilitation Center, Woodland Heights offers cardiac rehabilitation, stroke recovery and physical and occupational rehabilitation. Combining modern facilities, leading technology, an exceptional staff and a commitment to the communities it serves, Woodland Heights Medical Center remains at the forefront of quality health care in Deep East Texas

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Sources:

National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health; American Heart Association, americanheart.org; National Institutes of Health, nih.gov; WebMD, webmd.com