**How to reduce your cholesterol level**

**What is cholesterol?**

Cholesterol is a waxy, fat-like substance that is essential for the body in small amounts. It plays a vital role in how every cell works and is also the material which the body uses to make other vital chemicals including hormones. It is made in the body by the liver and is also obtained from diet.

**Know your cholesterol level**

Being aware of your cholesterol level is the first step to maintaining a healthy heart. If you have a history of heart disease in the family or worried you have high cholesterol, speak with your GP who will be able to advise you.

**The good and the bad**

Cholesterol is transported around the bloodstream in ‘vehicles’ called lipoproteins.¹

There are two main types of lipoproteins. LDL (low density lipoproteins), often called ‘bad’ cholesterol, carries cholesterol from the liver to the cells. HDL (high-density lipoproteins), or ‘good’ cholesterol, returns excess cholesterol to the liver. You should aim to have a low level of LDL and a high level of HDL.

**Factors that can lead to high cholesterol**

**A diet high in saturated fat** – Saturated fats are found in animal products such as dairy, meats and also in cakes, biscuits and pies.

**Sedentary lifestyle** – Lack of exercise may increase ‘bad’ LDL cholesterol and decrease ‘good’ HDL cholesterol.

**A family history of high cholesterol** – One in every 500 people also has a gene which means that they have abnormally high levels of cholesterol.

**Overweight** – If you have too much body fat, especially in your waist area, you are at a higher risk of health problems. However you cannot see if you have raised cholesterol and it can affect both those that are normal and overweight.

**Age** – Cholesterol generally rises slightly with increasing age.

**Smoking** – Smoking lowers HDL cholesterol levels and increases the tendency for blood to clot.

**Excess alcohol consumption** – Moderate use of alcohol can increase ‘good’ HDL cholesterol. However, increased alcohol consumption brings other health dangers, such as alcoholism, high blood pressure, obesity, stroke and cancer.

**A few changes could help protect you from this hidden condition**

* Try to keep your consumption of saturated fats to a minimum.
* Aim to replace saturated fats, with moderate amounts of ‘good’ fats also known as monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats.
* Grill, steam, boil and bake foods instead of frying and roasting.
* Eat plenty of fibre-rich foods.
* Enjoy healthy snacks such as fruit, nuts and seeds, olives etc.
* Eat at least two portions of fish per week, one of which should be oily (Choose from salmon, mackerel, sardines, pilchards or herring).
* Include foods enriched with plant stanols/sterols, which are clinically proven to lower ‘bad’ LDL cholesterol as part of a healthy diet and lifestyle.
* Stay physically active. The Department of Health recommends at least 30 minutes of moderate intensity exercise on five or more days of the week.
* Avoid smoking.
* Try and manage your stress levels.