



Anita Heidema (centre) is able to manage her cholesterol without medication, thanks to support and education from the team at Southlake's lipid centre, including cardiologist Dr. Jack Symmes and dietitian Beata Blajer. Jim Craigmyle photograph

Clinic offers lifelong strategy for managing high cholesterol

by Lee Ann Waterman

It was a conversation Anita Heidema, 45, had been dreading. She has a strong family history of high cholesterol and, in her 20s, had been told she had the cholesterol levels of a 65-year-old man. It was time to do something about it, said her family doctor.

High cholesterol, increased levels of a

certain type of fat in the blood, increases the risk of hardening of the arteries and can lead to coronary artery disease, heart attack or stroke.

Medication was the obvious solution for Ms Heidema, but she asked about alternatives and was referred to the lipid

clinic at Southlake Regional Health Centre.

"The clinic doctor wanted to put me on medication right away," she says. "I asked him to please give me some time." And he agreed.

During that time, she made full use of the clinic's resources. She attended group

“I have a plan that I can live with for the rest of my life.”

Anita Heidema, lipid clinic patient

sessions to learn about lifestyle changes, such as regular exercise and stress reduction, that could help lower her cholesterol. She met with a dietitian and paid close attention to advice on avoiding foods high in saturated fats and boosting consumption of fibre, plant sterols and omega-3 fatty acids.

Ms Heidema incorporated what she learned into her everyday life—eliminating or adding certain foods to her diet and getting daily exercise, such as spinning classes, that elevated her heart rate.

In six months, Ms Heidema had lost 10 pounds, was feeling mentally and physically strong and had lowered her cholesterol sufficiently that the endocrinologist said she did not need medication.

“I am so happy with the clinic,” she says, explaining the health care team at Southlake gave her the tools to manage her cholesterol for the long-term. “I have a plan that I can live with for the rest of my life.”

While Ms Heidema’s story is inspiring, Dr. Juda Habet, a cardiologist and medical director for cardiac rehabilitation at Southlake, says it is not typical of every patient. Most will require medication to manage their cholesterol.

But, he adds, maintaining a healthy weight, eating heart-healthy foods and getting regular exercise can play a role in lowering cholesterol and also help ward off inactivity, obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure—all of which are also risk factors for cardiovascular disease.

“By addressing the risks—and lipidemia is just one of them—you are actually lowering the cardiac event rate,” he explains.

“When the patient is able to reach the target lipid levels, it is a success,” he says. “If there have been changes to the patient’s lifestyle as well—they lose weight and spend time exercising—that is a complete success.”

For more than 10 years, Southlake Regional Health Centre’s lipid clinic has been treating patients with elevated and/or difficult to treat cholesterol or triglyceride (both are types of lipids or fat in the blood) levels. Patients are referred by family physicians or specialists.

The clinic has weekly hours and is staffed by a team of health care providers including endocrinologists and a dietitian.

For more information on Southlake’s lipid clinic, visit the hospital’s website at southlakeregional.org.

Cholesterol, heart disease and stroke

High blood cholesterol is a major risk factor for heart disease and stroke.

High LDL (low-density lipoprotein) cholesterol levels can lead to a build-up of plaque in the artery walls,

narrowing your arteries (atherosclerosis). This can make it difficult for blood to flow through your heart and body, putting you at increased risk of circulatory problems, heart disease and stroke.

Lifestyle choices to help manage cholesterol

- Reduce your fat intake to 20 to 35 per cent of your daily calories.
- Choose healthy fats, such as poly-unsaturated and monounsaturated, found mainly in vegetable oils, nuts and fish.
- Limit your intake of saturated fat to less than seven per cent of your daily calories. Saturated fat is found mainly in red meat and high-fat dairy products.
- Avoid trans fats, often found in foods made with shortening or partially hydrogenated vegetable oil, including hard margarines, fast foods and many pre-made foods. Trans fats raise bad cholesterol and lower good cholesterol.
- Eat more vegetables, fruit and whole grains.
- Use lower-fat cooking methods such as baking, broiling or steaming. Avoid fried food.
- Be smoke-free. Smoking increases LDL cholesterol.
- Be physically active. Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines recommend adults accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity a week, in bouts of 10 minutes or more. Being active on a regular basis can improve good cholesterol levels.
- Achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Source: Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada

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