

Cholesterol Screening in Children

By Victoria B. Teague, MD

Although cardiovascular disease is rare in children, risk factors present in childhood can greatly increase the likelihood a child will develop heart disease as an adult. Recently, new guidelines were issued by the National Institutes of Health recommending that physicians address cardiovascular risk factors as part of all well-child visits. These guidelines now recommend that ALL children be screened for high cholesterol at least once between the ages of 9 and 11 years, and again between ages 17 and 21 years. In children with risk factors, this screening may begin anytime after the age of 2 years.

With our recent acquisition of technology to run **Lipid** (cholesterol) panels on-site using only a finger prick specimen, the PAJC physicians are now checking lipid profiles regularly at well child visits. With results immediately available, abnormal levels can be addressed immediately and follow-up recommendations given. **Dyslipidemia** (abnormal levels of cholesterol or triglycerides in the blood) can be caused by numerous factors, some of which (such as heredity) cannot be controlled and some of which are correctable (diet, weight, and physical activity/exercise).

A basic lipid profile involves checking levels of total cholesterol, LDL (“bad”) cholesterol, HDL (“good”) cholesterol, and triglycerides. Fasting levels are considered to be the most accurate, but non-fasting levels are generally very similar to fasting levels. The recommended **total cholesterol** level for children is <180. More important than the total cholesterol level is the **LDL level**, which is the most important risk factor for heart attack and stroke. Mildly elevated LDL’s can usually be decreased by lifestyle changes involving diet and exercise. Higher levels of **HDL** help lower the risk of heart disease, but low levels are not necessarily harmful and are often hereditary. Lastly, elevated **triglycerides** are usually caused by the same diet and activity factors that affect LDL levels, and thus are initially managed with similar techniques.

In general, the following measures will help to optimize heart health and lipids levels:

- 1-Eating a diet limited in saturated and trans fats, with adequate fiber for age, and limited sugar and starches.
- 2-Maintaining a healthy weight, with a body mass index <85%.
- 3-Habitual vigorous activity or exercise for 30-60 minutes 4-6 days a week.
- 4-Regular cholesterol screening and follow-up as recommended by your physician.

Please feel free to discuss any questions you may have about your child’s risk factors for heart disease during your child’s annual well child visit.