Cholesterol

This factsheet is for people who want to learn more about cholesterol levels and health.

Why is high cholesterol a problem?
The main risk associated with high cholesterol is cardiovascular disease (CVD). This includes diseases of the heart and blood vessels. High cholesterol causes blood vessels to become narrowed with fatty deposits which can result in heart attacks, strokes and blood vessel problems.

What causes high cholesterol?
There are several factors that may contribute to high blood cholesterol:

- A diet that's high in saturated fat
- Lack of exercise
- Family history - people are at a higher risk of high cholesterol if they have a direct male relative aged under 55 or a female relative aged under 65 affected by heart disease
- Being overweight
- Age and gender - cholesterol generally rises slightly with increasing age and men are more likely to be affected than women
- Drinking more than the recommended amount of alcohol (ie more than 2 units per day)

Other health conditions such as poorly controlled diabetes, certain kidney and liver diseases and an underactive thyroid gland may also cause cholesterol levels to rise. Some medicines such as beta-blockers, steroids or thiazides (a type of diuretic) may also affect blood lipid levels.

How diet affects blood cholesterol

Only a small amount of cholesterol comes directly from your diet - the majority is produced by your liver. However, if your diet is high in saturated fats and cholesterol this can cause your liver to produce more bad cholesterol. The amount that diet influences cholesterol levels varies from person to person.

Measuring cholesterol

The amount of cholesterol in your blood is measured in units called millimoles per litre of blood, usually shortened to "mmol/litre" or "mmol/l". Current UK guidelines state that it is desirable to have a total cholesterol level under 5mmol/l.