

In his own words: living with high cholesterol

En Español (Spanish Version)



Jim, a 60-year-old financial advisor, lives in the Midwest with his wife, son, and granddaughter. Two years ago, he was diagnosed with high cholesterol. Coming from a family with a history of heart problems, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol, Jim was not surprised by the diagnosis. To manage his diagnosis, he has successfully made a balanced diet and exercise part of his lifestyle, believing that moderation is the key.

What was your first sign that something was wrong? What symptoms did you experience?

I didn't experience any symptoms. Several years ago during a routine physical, the doctor said my cholesterol was too high. My LDL and my HDL were both high, but I was running 10 miles a week. Because the ratio was good, he didn't put me on any medication. He just told me to watch my diet and continue the exercise. It was soon after that I hurt my knee, so I quit running. Then, the ratio wasn't so good, so the doctor put me on medication.

What was the diagnosis experience like?

It didn't really bother me. High cholesterol isn't life-threatening like so many other conditions. Also, I wasn't real surprised since I have a family history of high blood pressure and heart conditions.

What was your initial and then longer-term reaction to the diagnosis?

My initial reaction was to look at my diet to see what I could change there. Long term, I was going to try to follow the diet on a regular basis. My knee was improving, so I began walking 2 miles, five days a week.

How do you manage high cholesterol?

Right away, I changed my diet, which caused the cholesterol to come down a little bit, but the doctor said it wasn't enough. He put me on 10 milligrams of Lipitor a day. When I went back in 3 months, the cholesterol was coming down. I've been on Lipitor now for one year. I was concerned about the side effects, so I ask my doctor about them. He said some people get aches and pains, but nothing serious. In the first three months, I did have quite a bit of pain in my left shoulder, but rather than go off the medication, I just took a third of the tablet. The doctor said that was fine. I go back every 3 months to have my cholesterol checked and it continues to be in the normal range.

Did you make any lifestyle or dietary changes in response to high cholesterol?

Prior to being diagnosed with high cholesterol, I was on medication for high blood pressure. Because of that, I already was using very little salt and seldom ate egg yolks. I would use Egg Beaters instead of real eggs. I cut way back on things like cured hams, red meats, sausages, fried foods, and animal fats. Now I eat more vegetables and beans. I love bacon, but now we eat turkey bacon, which we all really like, and it doesn't have all the fat.

The doctor gave me several pages of diet information, but it was almost too overwhelming. I wanted to put off the medication to see if the diet alone would be enough to lower the cholesterol, but I would probably have to go off all red meats and make radical changes in my diet to make that happen without medication. I've just developed better patterns of eating. I allow myself to eat a little bit of most foods. I just know that I can't eat much of the high fat foods.

Did you seek any type of emotional support?

Not really. However, my family is very understanding.

Does high cholesterol have any impact on your family?

My wife cooks what she thinks I can eat, as well as cooking food the rest of the family can enjoy. I just eat less of some of the foods she prepares. I would rather do that, than deny the family the food they like. It really doesn't bother me.

What advice would you give to anyone living with high cholesterol?

Exercise regularly and watch your diet, and see if that alone will fix the problem. If that isn't enough, then you have to resort to other measures such as medication.

As told to Virginia Mansfield