



**Press Release**  
**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **Take Control of Your Heart Health During Cholesterol Education Month**

*Screenings, Healthy Eating, and Prevention to Reduce Heart Disease Risk*

HAMILTON, Mont. (Sept 9, 2024) – As cardiovascular disease remains a leading cause of death in the United States, Sapphire Community Health is urging the local community to prioritize their heart health during National Cholesterol Education Month. With a focus on prevention, regular screenings, and healthy lifestyle choices, the organization aims to empower individuals to take control of their cholesterol levels and reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke.

“Cholesterol management is a cornerstone of heart health,” said Jean Higgins-Peretto, PA, Family Medicine, at Sapphire Community Health. “By staying informed, getting regular screenings, and making thoughtful dietary and lifestyle changes, our community can significantly reduce their risk of cardiovascular issues.”

Cholesterol, a necessary fat-like substance in the blood, can become dangerous when levels of low-density lipoprotein (LDL), or “bad cholesterol,” rise too high. Elevated LDL levels can lead to the buildup of plaque in the arteries, which restricts blood flow and increases the risk of heart disease, heart attacks, and strokes. Conversely, high-density lipoprotein (HDL), or “good cholesterol,” helps remove excess cholesterol from the bloodstream, offering a protective effect.

One of the key challenges with cholesterol is its silent nature; many people remain unaware of their cholesterol levels until a serious health issue arises. This is why regular screenings are essential for early detection and management.

“Understanding your cholesterol levels is the first step in preventing heart disease,” Higgins-Peretto emphasized. “We encourage everyone to come in for a screening, especially if you haven’t had one recently. Knowing your numbers allows you to take proactive steps toward better health.”

For those found to have high cholesterol, lifestyle modifications are critical. Among these, dietary changes can be particularly effective in managing cholesterol levels. The foods we choose to eat have a profound impact on our heart health, and incorporating heart-healthy options into daily meals can make a significant difference.

Sapphire Community Health recommends focusing on foods rich in unsaturated fats, such as avocados, olive oil, nuts, and fatty fish, like salmon. These foods can help lower LDL cholesterol levels while providing essential nutrients that support overall cardiovascular health. Omega-3 fatty acids, found in fish, like salmon and mackerel, are particularly beneficial for heart health, as they help reduce inflammation and lower the risk of heart disease.

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Another important dietary component is soluble fiber, which can be found in foods like oats, beans, lentils, and fruits such as apples and berries. Soluble fiber works by binding to cholesterol in the digestive system and preventing its absorption into the bloodstream. Regular consumption of these fiber-rich foods can lead to noticeable improvements in cholesterol levels over time. However, just as important as including heart-healthy foods is reducing the intake of those that can raise LDL cholesterol.

Foods high in saturated fats, such as red meats, full-fat dairy products, and fried foods, should be limited. Additionally, it's crucial to avoid trans fats, which are often found in commercially baked goods like cookies, cakes, and pastries. Trans fats can significantly increase LDL cholesterol levels and are associated with a higher risk of heart disease.

While diet is a powerful tool for managing cholesterol, it works best when combined with regular physical activity. Exercise not only helps to lower LDL cholesterol but also raises HDL cholesterol, contributing to overall cardiovascular health. Engaging in at least 150 minutes of moderate exercise per week, such as brisk walking, swimming, or cycling, can have a significant impact on cholesterol levels and heart health.

“Physical activity is one of the most effective ways to improve heart health,” said Higgins-Peretto. “Even moderate exercise can help to reduce LDL cholesterol levels, improve circulation, and strengthen the heart. It’s also a great way to manage weight, which is another important factor in preventing heart disease.”

In addition to structured exercise, Higgins-Peretto encourages finding ways to stay active throughout the day. “Incorporate movement into your daily routine—take the stairs instead of the elevator, go for a walk during your lunch break, or enjoy an active hobby like gardening or dancing. Every little bit helps when it comes to maintaining a healthy heart.”

Sapphire Community Health is committed to supporting the community in their journey toward better heart health. Beyond screenings and dietary advice, the organization offers a range of services designed to help individuals achieve and maintain healthy cholesterol levels. These services include personalized health consultations, nutritional counseling, and ongoing monitoring to ensure that patients stay on track with their heart health goals.

“We want to make it easy for our community to take action,” said Higgins-Peretto. “Our team is here to provide screenings, offer guidance on healthy eating, and support your journey to better heart health. Remember, small changes can lead to big results.”

Sapphire Community Health accepts Medicare, Medicaid, private insurance, and also offers a sliding fee scale for those without insurance who qualify. To schedule an appointment for a cholesterol screening or to learn more about managing your heart health, please call (406) 363-3210.

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#### **About Sapphire Community Health**

Established in 2015, Sapphire Community Health (SCH) is a comprehensive, community-based outpatient primary health and mental healthcare center serving Montana's greater Bitterroot Valley region. Located in Hamilton, Montana, SCH offers a wide range of patient-centered health and wellness services, including primary healthcare, acute care services, women's health, pediatric care, clinical laboratory services, mental health counseling, substance abuse counseling, social services, and pharmacy services. For more information, please visit [www.sapphirechc.org](http://www.sapphirechc.org).

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