

HIGH CHOLESTEROL DANGERS

A rare genetic condition and other health-related news —DOLLY PENLAND & KERRY SPECKMAN

High cholesterol increases the risk for heart disease or stroke. Since September is Cholesterol Awareness Month, it's a good time to have those cholesterol levels tested. This is particularly important because of a common, yet little known genetic condition called familial hypercholesterolemia (FH), which affects one in 500 people.

"Patients with FH usually have cholesterol [levels] over 300 as adults (more than 250 in a child would arouse suspicion), but where you really recognize it is the pattern of early heart attacks and, to a certain extent, strokes and vascular problems in the family," says Dr. John Guyton, director of the Duke University Lipid Clinic and a member of the Jacksonville-based National Lipid Association.

Unfortunately, many people don't find out they have FH until they have a heart attack at an early age. Early detection and treatment is critical.

"For men, about half of all untreated patients [with FH] will have a fatal or non-fatal heart attack before age 50, and about half of all women with [untreated] FH will have a heart attack, fatal or non-fatal, before age 60," Guyton says.

Amelia Island resident Katherine Wilemon was 39 when she had a heart attack four years ago. Despite being diagnosed with FH at 15, doctors ignored the warning signs for two weeks, including the crushing chest pain she felt every time she moved.

"I weigh 120 pounds, and it's written on my chart, but they were still shocked that I had 100 percent occlusion," Wilemon says. "Until I had a heart attack at 39, [my condition] was treated as just high cholesterol."

Adults with FH usually need three or four medications to control the cholesterol in addition to a healthy diet and regular exercise. If a parent has FH, each child has a 50 percent chance of inheriting the genetic defect, which means children must be tested, too.

For information about familial hypercholesterolemia or the Foundation of the National Lipid Association, go to learnyourlipids.com or call 309-6260. *