What is Familial Hypercholesterolemia (FH)?

Familial Hyper-cholesterol-aemia (FH) is an inherited condition where a genetic problem causes high blood cholesterol (a type of fat in the blood) and is passed from one generation to another. Those affected have an increased risk of a heart attack or a stroke. However treatments can drastically reduce the risk of having these problems.

What causes FH?

FH runs in families and, therefore, it is important to make an early diagnosis of all family members. It is caused by a faulty gene which affects 1 in 500 people. If one parent has FH, there is a 50% chance that their son or daughter may also have it.

What are the symptoms of FH?

The majority of people with FH, particularly the young, have no symptoms and that is why it is important to screen them, as they are frequently not aware of their condition. Some people may have fat deposits on the eyelids (called xanthelasmata) or over the tendons of the hands, elbows, knees and ankles (called xanthomata).

How is FH diagnosed?

In most cases, FH is diagnosed by a blood test to check the cholesterol level, and taking the clinical and family history.

What are the treatment options?

FH is generally treated with tablets called statins, which have been well tried and tested. The aim of the treatment is to lower cholesterol levels and reduce the risk of the person of having a heart attack or a stroke. People with FH also need to follow a low fat diet .

Are there any risks from taking statins?

Many studies in the past 20 years have shown that statins are effective and safe. A very small number of people may have side effects, such as muscle pains, which tend to go away when they are stopped or changed with a different statin.

What are the benefits of treatment?

If treatment with statins is started early enough in people with FH, their risk of having heart attacks or strokes in future are greatly reduced.

What should you do then?

Having looked at your family history, we think that it is important for you to have a simple blood test to check your cholesterol level and to decide if you have inherited the condition.

Do I need to do anything before my blood test?

You should not eat or drink anything (except water) from 10:00 pm the night before your blood test. Once the blood test has been done you can eat and drink normally.

What will happen next?

If your blood test suggests that you may have FH, then your GP will refer you for a hospital appointment with a doctor specialised in cholesterol conditions.

Contact Information:

Please contact your GP if you have any further questions.