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'Normal' Triglyceride Levels Are Too High

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WASHINGTON — People who think they have healthy levels of cholesterol may still be at risk of heart disease, researchers said on Saturday.

They said even "normal" levels of blood fats known as triglycerides were high enough to make heart disease likely.

"Previously, nobody thought triglyceride was a major risk factor at these lower levels," Dr. Michael Miller, a cardiologist at the University of Maryland, said in a statement.

So-called normal levels of triglyceride are anywhere between 100 and 200 milligrams per deciliter of blood. This is a standard measurement used around the world.

But Miller's team followed 350 men and women for 18 years, and found those with triglycerides at those levels were 50 percent more likely to have a heart attack, to need heart bypass surgery or angioplasty to treat clogged arteries, or even to die from heart disease.

"This study is the first to look at such a low level of triglyceride. It turned out to be an important predictor of future heart disease," Miller said.

Writing in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology, Miller recommended that guidelines for desirable triglyceride levels be set lower.

"Any level above 100 appeared to increase the risk. It is not like cholesterol, where the higher the level, the higher the risk," Miller said.

Triglycerides can be broken down with regular exercise, a diet low in fat, and eating food rich in omega-3 fatty acids which include flax or linseed oil, canola oil and some fish.

In a second study, Miller found that women with heart disease are much less likely to get cholesterol-lowering drugs than men are.

He looked at the cases of 825 men and women with coronary artery disease across the United States and Canada and found half had dangerously high levels of LDL, the so-called "bad" cholesterol. Twenty percent of them were women.

In 1994, about equal numbers of men and women were offered cholesterol-lowering drugs — 38 percent of the women and 42 percent of the men.

But by 1997, 54 percent of the men and only 35 percent of the women were being given the drugs. This was despite a number of studies that have shown cholesterol-lowering drugs can save lives.

"We were baffled as to why medication use was not increased in women with heart disease, since all of the recent trials that have shown