

"Normal" Triglyceride Levels Are Too High

By Faith Reidenbach

NEW YORK (Reuters) -- To evaluate a patient's risk of heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes and other diseases, doctors often test blood levels of triglycerides -- molecules that carry fat through the bloodstream. But a new study suggests that the triglyceride levels now considered "normal" may still be too high.

A research team led by Dr. Michael Miller, of the University of Maryland in Baltimore, proposes that the "normal" limit for triglycerides should be set at 100 milligrams per deciliter of blood -- half the amount presently considered normal by the National Cholesterol Education Program.

"There wasn't great rhyme or reason why that cutoff of 200 was selected," Miller said in an interview with Reuters. "It was thought that perhaps it would be easy for physicians and the general public to keep a level of 200 in mind, because that's the cutoff used with cholesterol."

Miller and his colleagues recommended the lower cutoff after studying 350 patients who were diagnosed with coronary artery disease in 1977 or 1978. The researchers studied the incidence of subsequent "cardiovascular events" in these patients: death from heart disease, a nonfatal heart attack, nonsurgical blockage of coronary vessels, or the need for an artery-clearing procedure such as bypass surgery or balloon angioplasty.

Over the next 18 years, 199 patients experienced a new cardiovascular event, the research team found. A triglyceride count of 100 or more increased the relative risk of a new cardiovascular event by 50% and reduced the chance of surviving a subsequent event. Miller's group published their findings in the May issue of the Journal of the American College of Cardiology.

"The good news," Miller told Reuters, "is that triglycerides tend to be more responsive to conservative measures than cholesterol is. On average, you can reduce cholesterol levels maybe about 10% with a good diet and exercise, but you may be able to reduce triglycerides as much as 30%, 40%, and sometimes even 50%. So we don't necessarily need to jump to medications."

So far, no clinical trial has examined whether lowering triglyceride levels affects the incidence of cardiovascular events. "That same question was posed for cholesterol 20 years ago," Miller noted in the interview. "Basically, we're about 20 years behind in triglycerides."

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