

mind & body

by Jessica Snyder Sachs

Important News about Women and Heart Disease

Finally, medical experts are discovering what predisposes women to heart disease. Their research suggests that abnormal levels of blood cholesterol and triglycerides (blood fats) may pose somewhat different risks for women than for men.

The findings do not change the American Heart Association's general guidelines for both women and men, which are to keep levels of low-density lipoprotein (L.D.L.) below 130, high-density lipoprotein (H.D.L.) above 45, and triglycerides below 250. However, the research does suggest that women may need to be most concerned with levels of triglycerides and H.D.L., the so-called "good" cholesterol. In contrast, L.D.L., the artery-clogging "bad" cholesterol, may play a more important role in heart disease in men.

The findings come in part from a 15-year study that followed 140 women who had been referred to a heart clinic for symptoms of heart disease or because they were at risk due to family history or related reasons. During the course of the study, the odds of cardiac death were highest among diabetics, who had four times the risk of nondiabetics. Nondiabetic women whose levels of H.D.L. were below 45 were nearly three times as likely to die from cardiovascular disease than those with higher levels. The study also found that of

those women at risk for heart disease, the nondiabetics with triglyceride levels above 150 were more than twice as likely to die of heart disease than those with levels below 150, reports lead researcher Michael Miller, M.D., director of the Center for Preventive Cardiology at the University of Maryland.

Dr. Miller suggests that all women at risk for heart disease have their triglycerides and H.D.L. measured in addition to total cholesterol. His conclusions support those of the ongoing Framingham Heart Study, which likewise suggests that high triglycerides pose a particular threat for women.

Fortunately, says Dr. Miller, most women can lower triglyceride levels with weight loss and dietary changes. Omega-3 fatty acids, abundant in red salmon, albacore (white tuna), herring, and mackerel, seem to have an inherent ability to lower triglycerides, he says. The keys to raising low H.D.L. levels include exercising, losing weight, and not smoking.

Dr. Miller's research is among the first to focus on women and heart disease. In the past, there was an inaccurate perception that women did not suffer from this "male" disease. But in fact, heart disease is the third leading cause of death among women age 30 to 39, the second between 40 and 64, and the number one killer after age 65. □

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