

## TECHNOLOGY

# Low Levels of 'Good' Cholesterol May Pose Heart Risk, Studies Say

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New research indicates that some people with "safe" blood cholesterol levels may still run a high risk of heart disease, a finding that may overturn cholesterol guidelines released just last year.

Four new studies strongly suggest that heart disease can strike individuals with especially low amounts of high-density lipoproteins, or HDL—the body's so-called good cholesterol—even if their total cholesterol level is below 200 milligrams per deciliter, an amount doctors currently think is safe.

The studies, presented in Washington, D.C., at the annual American Heart Association meeting, may force doctors to take HDL levels more seriously and encourage them to screen patients commonly for HDL, as well as for total cholesterol.

While having high levels of HDL was widely thought to provide a protection against heart attacks, the new studies are the first to show that low levels of HDL can be very dangerous.

### Warner-Lambert Might Benefit

The reports may fuel the already surprisingly strong sales performance of Warner-Lambert Co.'s cholesterol drug, Lopid, which is particularly effective in raising HDL levels. Lopid has been available for six years. But its sales growth was sluggish until late last year when a Finnish study indicated that Lopid can reduce the risk of heart attacks. That study provided the first strong evidence of the importance of raising HDL. Analysts expect Lopid sales to double to about \$200 million this year.

In one study, researchers at Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions in Baltimore looked at patients who had clogged arteries even though their cholesterol levels were below 200. In the study, 68% of 138 men and 32% of 37 women had HDL levels

of less than 35. HDL amounts above that level are considered safe and levels of 60 to 80 are considered protective.

Another study by researchers at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston found that 60% of individuals with cholesterol below 200 had signs of clogged arteries. About three-quarters of those with disease had HDL below 40.

### Boston University Study

Also, a report by doctors at Boston University School of Medicine found that patients with total cholesterol below 240 run a three-times-greater risk of heart disease than those with levels above 240 if their HDL is below the safety range.

A report based on a study of 22,071 individuals in a program called the Physicians' Health Study found that those with the lowest HDL levels had five times the risk of heart disease as those with high HDL.

HDL's job in the bloodstream is to scavenge potentially dangerous cholesterol out of the body. High total cholesterol is believed to promote artery clogging, a condition that can cause heart disease.

The new studies seem to indicate that if the HDL is too low, even low levels of cholesterol can become dangerous. High HDL is common in people who exercise often and have low-fat diets, but it may also be associated with genetic factors.

Current guidelines to doctors issued last year by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute recommended that people check their HDL only if their total cholesterol rises above 240. The new reports will probably trigger a debate to change the guidelines. But some doctors at the heart meeting argued that more data is needed first, while others contended that several other lipoproteins may be equally important, and that they, too, should be regularly screened.