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Low level of 'good' cholesterol is bad

By Tim Friend
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Too little "good" cholesterol is just as dangerous as too much bad cholesterol — and may not show up on screening tests, a new study shows.

"We didn't know until now that low levels were bad in people with normal total cholesterol," says Dr. Michael Miller, of the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.

The findings — presented Wednesday at the American Heart Association's 61st Scientific Sessions — mean doctors should check HDL ("good" cholesterol) levels in all patients at risk for heart disease.

Miller checked 1,000 patients hospitalized for chest pain. Results:

▶ A third of those diagnosed with heart disease had normal total cholesterol levels.

▶ Of those patients, 2 out of 3 men had low HDL — less than 35 — and 4 out of 5 women had levels less than 45.

Normal HDL levels for men: 45-50; for women: 50-60. HDL helps the body rid itself of excess cholesterol.

Low HDL is usually hereditary, but you can raise it by losing weight, not smoking and including olive oil in your diet.

It's too soon to recommend HDL testing for everyone, but Miller says you may be at risk for heart disease with low levels of HDL and no other risk factors.