

Level of good cholesterol 'tells if heart attacks will recur'

NEW YORK — Doctors should now be able to better predict which heart-attack survivors are at risk of another attack by measuring their level of "good" cholesterol, say researchers from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

It is well known that heart-attack survivors who have high cholesterol levels need to get them down. But if their total cholesterol level is normal, the risk of a second heart attack has been more difficult to predict.

A low level of "good" cholesterol, known as high-density lipoprotein (HDL), is ominous, say the Johns Hopkins researchers in the October issue of *Circulation*, the American Heart Association's journal.

Average levels of HDL are 45 to 50 mg per decilitre of blood for men, and 55 to 60 for women. A low level of HDL is one that is less than 35.

High HDL levels are beneficial because it appears that HDL removes heart-disease-causing cholesterol, according to study leader Dr Michael Miller.

An expert cautioned that the new study results are preliminary and must be interpreted with care. "These findings, although potentially relevant to many patients, must be considered tentative and in need of confirmation in a larger population," said Dr Frank Sacks of Harvard Medical School.

Dr Miller said that HDL levels can vary, and one should have one's levels measured at least two or three times before worrying too much about a low reading.

He said that there are several approaches to raising HDL: exercising regularly; quitting smoking; losing weight, if one is obese; taking niacin, a form of vitamin B; and taking a prescription drug called gemfibrozil, sold as Lopid.

Patients with low HDL should talk to their doctor about these options, he advised.

In the new study, the researchers followed the progress of 83 men and 24 women who had coronary artery disease since 1977 or 1978 and whose total cholesterol levels were in the normal range. —

New York Times

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1992

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The New York Times