

Health column: Knowing your cholesterol number is key to preventing heart attack

Written by

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As an internist who works with adults, I talk with patients about cholesterol on a daily basis. Over the last few decades, it has become clear that cholesterol is present in the hard substance called plaque that can clog the arteries of the heart, and people with elevated cholesterol are more likely to develop hardened arteries.

Certain medications that lower cholesterol are able to prevent heart attacks and strokes. However, there is a lot we still do not know about cholesterol. Many people with high cholesterol do not develop heart disease, and conversely, many people who develop heart disease do not have high cholesterol. Overall, heart disease is the greatest cause of illness and death in the United States.

It is recommended that all adults know what their cholesterol is, especially if they have one of the other risks for heart disease: older than 45 for men and older than 55 for women, smoking, high blood

pressure, diabetes or history of early heart disease in a parent, brother or sister. Having more of these risks increases the chance of a heart attack.

Providers often use information from a large study of the adults in Framingham, Mass., to help determine their patients' risks of heart attack in the next 10 years. If you look on the web for "Framingham calculator," you can determine the risk for yourself and your friends, based on their age, smoking status, blood pressure and cholesterol level.

For example, a man age 70 who is not a smoker, has normal blood pressure and whose cholesterol is at the typical target levels has a 10-year risk of heart attack of 16 percent. The good news, put another way, is that 84 percent of such men will not have a heart attack in the next 10 years.

A 70-year old woman with the same numbers would have a risk of 6 percent. But, add uncontrolled high blood pressure and elevated cholesterol, and the man's

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risk jumps to greater than 30 percent, and the woman's risk becomes 19 percent. You can play with a Framingham calculator to get a feel for the importance of the various risk factors.

The whole point in evaluating cholesterol and other risk factors is to identify early those who are at risk for heart disease and offer them effective, preventive treatment. We are still looking for better tests that can identify those at the highest risk.

A promising candidate for such a test is the Coronary Artery Calcium Score, which uses a CT scan of the heart to measure the amount of calcium in the arteries. Calcium is found in the plaque. Those with the highest scores are much more likely to have a heart attack and can be treated particularly aggressively. Guidelines are still being developed for how to use this test.

So ask your doctor, "What is my risk of a heart attack?" If your risk is elevated, develop a plan to reduce the risk. Whatever else you do, stay active and eat naturally.

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