



Sue Ann Says: Get to know what's inside your blood vessels

Cholesterol is always a hot topic. I've been at dinner parties ("Can you pass the butter please?") where we discussed our "good" and "bad" cholesterol levels the way folks talk about the stock market or how the Badgers are doing. Knowing our cholesterol levels and working to manage them is a smart move. A balanced diet, exercise and refraining from tobacco smoke are essential in maintaining healthy cholesterol levels.

But guess what? Almost half of all heart attacks occur in people with normal levels of cholesterol. It seems there are more factors at work for heart disease and stroke than just cholesterol. Researchers are especially intrigued with the role inflammation may play in atherosclerosis (hardening of the arteries). Atherosclerosis, of course, substantially increases our risk for heart attack and stroke.

I wanted to find out what's at work in my own blood vessels and how different heart risk factors arise, so I turned to Joseph Bellissimo, MD, medical director at Madison's Wisconsin Heart and Vascular Institute.

Buildup of LDL leads to atherosclerosis

Dr. Bellissimo explained that cholesterol, a soft, fat-like substance, does not dissolve in blood. Particles called lipoproteins transport cholesterol around the body. Low-density lipoproteins (LDL – what people often refer to as "bad" cholesterol) move cholesterol through the blood. High-density lipoproteins (HDL, the "good" stuff) move cholesterol to the liver for disposal. The ideal is to have a good balance of both types of lipoproteins.

A high level of LDL can cause atherosclerosis. (Smoking, high blood pressure and diabetes also contribute to atherosclerosis.) Together with other deposits of fatty substances, cellular waste products, calcium and other gunk, LDL builds up in the inner lining of the arteries, hardening into plaque. Plaque can obstruct blood flow through the artery. And sometimes the plaque ruptures, forming a blood clot that can completely cut off blood flow through the artery. Depending on where the blockage is, we might experience a stroke, heart attack, or pain in our arms and legs.

The inflammation connection

Studies have brought new focus to inflammation and its connections with atherosclerosis. Inflammation is our body's natural response to injury, protecting the body against infection and promoting wound healing. C-reactive protein (CRP) is one substance that our body releases as part of the inflammatory process. High sensitivity CRP (hs-CRP) often is associated with heart disease. Scientific studies have found that the higher the hs-CRP levels, the higher the patient's risk of heart attack.

So if doctors screen for hs-CRP, can they identify cardiovascular risks that might not be detected through cholesterol and other screenings?

“The connection is there,” Dr. Bellissimo told me. “But high levels of hs-CRP can be caused by other things, such as minor infection or a flare up of arthritis. Screening for hs-CRP shows promise, but we need to find more precise inflammatory markers.”

Dr. Bellissimo explains that CRP screening is most helpful for someone who has neither low nor high risk for heart disease, moderate cholesterol levels, and for whom doctors are unsure whether a statin drug would be beneficial.

Talk with your doctor to see if CRP screening is appropriate for you. Dr. Bellissimo cautions that if your test reveals a high CRP level, the test should be repeated in a week or so to rule out other factors that could influence the result.

Heart health

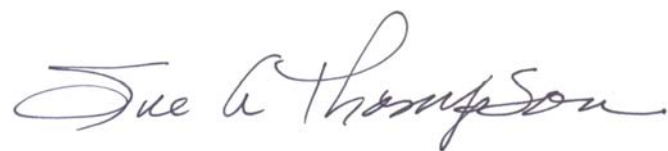
With all this new attention on inflammation, do we still need to pay attention to our cholesterol? Absolutely, Dr. Bellissimo emphasizes. And he notes that cholesterol-lowering medication is not a replacement for a heart-healthy lifestyle. “We could eliminate most adult cholesterol issues if everyone made healthy lifestyle choices,” he says.

His heart-healthy tips:

- Have regular cholesterol screenings and keep the LDL level down.
- Don’t smoke.
- Exercise regularly.
- Maintain good nutrition. High calorie, high-fat food causes a sudden spike in CRP and other inflammatory markers. Increase your intake of fruits and vegetables, lean protein, nuts and monosaturated fats like fish, avocados and olive oil. Shop the periphery of the grocery store, where you’ll find fresh produce, complex grains and fibers, and lean proteins.

Let’s join hands and heart and commit to these lifestyle changes ... for our own sake, and for our family. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,



Sue Ann Thompson
Founder & President
Wisconsin Women’s Health Foundation

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