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Women’s cholesterol levels higher than men’s:
Surprise finding from Australia’s biggest cholesterol study of GP patient records

- Four out of five middle aged women visit GPs with LDL cholesterol above ideal levels
- Recent study of almost 200,000 GP patient records will provide new insights into nation’s cholesterol challenges
- Analysis shows cholesterol no longer discriminates by income

Australian women visiting their GP have higher cholesterol than Australian men, according to early findings from the largest contemporary study of cholesterol levels in Australia.¹

This is a key finding of a soon to be released report titled: Australia’s Cholesterol Crossroads: An analysis of 199,331 GP patient cholesterol records from 2004 to 2009. Four out of five women aged 45 to 64 years present to GPs with levels of LDL (bad) cholesterol over 2.5mmol/L and 34 percent have levels of HDL (good) cholesterol below 1mmol/L which are therefore outside of ideal levels for heart health protection.¹ National Heart Foundation of Australia guidelines suggest that high risk individuals (e.g. those with diabetes or known heart disease) should aim for levels of LDL cholesterol under 2mmol/L and levels of HDL cholesterol over 1mmol/L.²

The study found half of middle aged women presenting to GPs had a total cholesterol exceeding 5.5mmol/L, the level generally considered as desirable by health professionals.¹ The average total cholesterol level of middle aged women presenting to a GP in 2009 was 5.5mmol/L versus the average for a middle aged man of 5.3mmol/L.¹ The average for female adults of all ages was also slightly higher than the average for adult men, with the 2009 average being 5.2mmol/L for women versus 5.1mmol/L for men.¹

One of the authors of the report, Professor Simon Stewart from Baker IDI said the findings are concerning given the link between cholesterol levels and cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in Australia.³,⁴ "It is concerning to find that many women are neglecting their heart health. We know cardiovascular disease is the biggest cause of death in Australian women³,⁴ and this data suggests there could be over a million middle aged women and more than two million adult Australian women living with cholesterol levels above ideal levels.¹,²

"We are concerned to find women’s cholesterol levels are generally higher than men’s. It is important for women to recognise that heart disease and stroke are highly prevalent (but also highly preventable) causes of death and disability in men and women alike," Prof Stewart said.

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The Cholesterol Crossroads report will also challenge existing perceptions that people in lower income areas have higher cholesterol levels. The study will show that levels of good, bad and total cholesterol are consistent between patients visiting GP clinics located in high and low income areas.

“The health wealth divide in respect to cholesterol levels may not exist anymore due to changing dietary patterns and lifestyles in all sections of the community. Rather than focus on socio-economic status, we have to acknowledge that at least a third of all Australian adults visiting their GP, from all walks of life, have cholesterol levels requiring action,” Prof Stewart said.

While showing no symptoms, elevated cholesterol is a risk factor for coronary heart disease, the leading cause of death in Australia.\textsuperscript{3,4} Studies have shown that lower LDL levels reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. For those on cholesterol lowering medicines known as statins, there is a 23 percent reduction in 5-year incidence of first major coronary event such as heart attack for every mmol/L reduction in LDL cholesterol at one year.\textsuperscript{5,6}

“If we are serious about reducing the biggest cause of death in this country, and our own personal risk of heart attack and stroke, we need to get serious about reducing our cholesterol levels further.

“The early findings of this study should serve as a wake-up call to all Australians, and in particular middle-aged Australian women. Getting LDL cholesterol levels down and HDL cholesterol levels higher is critically important for maintaining heart health and reducing risk of heart attack and stroke. We have been too complacent for too long about this important health issue,” Prof. Stewart said.

The Cholesterol Crossroads research is being conducted by Dr Melinda Carrington and Professor Simon Stewart from Baker IDI and is sponsored by AstraZeneca. Data used in this report was provided by Health Communication Network (HCN). Health Communication Network (HCN), a provider of clinical and practice management software for Australian GPs and specialists.

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Note to editors:
Further findings from this comprehensive analysis of GP records will be available in coming months. The final report will include an assessment of cholesterol levels by state and region and will provide insights into the GP and patient cholesterol interactions over time. The report is expected to be a valuable tool to help Australians, their doctors, and public health experts assess how well we are tackling this fundamental health indicator and enable resources to be directed to the areas of most need.

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About Baker IDI:
Baker IDI Heart & Diabetes Institute is an independent, internationally renowned medical research facility. Our work extends from the laboratory to wide-scale community studies with a focus on diagnosis, prevention and treatment of diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Our mission is to reduce death and disability from cardiovascular disease, diabetes and related disorders; two insidious and complex diseases responsible for the most deaths and the highest costs in the world in terms of treatments and hospitalisation.

For further information visit: www.bakeridi.edu.au

References:

4. The Shifting Burden of Cardiovascular Disease in Australia (2005), prepared for the National Heart Foundation of Australia by Access Economics.