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Health & Family Bookshelf

October 4, 2007

By **SHERYL DeVORE** | Managing Editor

When it comes to heart disease, Americans typically focus on their total cholesterol level. If it's under 200, you're feeling pretty good about the health of your heart.

Not so fast, and not so simple, said preventive cardiologist Stephen Devries, M.D. of Deerfield.

In fact, Dr. Devries suggests forgetting about your total cholesterol level and focusing instead on the levels of your triglycerides, HDL, LDL and even some new risk markers including CRP (C-reactive protein), which measures inflammation, and LDL particle size.

Dr. Stephen Devries, author of *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Cholesterol*, will sign his new book from 1 to 3 p.m. Oct. 14 at Barnes & Noble Booksellers, 728 N. Waukegan Road, Deerfield.

Your total cholesterol may be below 200, but if you've got too high or too low levels of some of these other risk markers, you might be heading for heart disease nonetheless.

Fear not.

Though heart disease is not completely preventable, Devries said, "It's largely preventable.

"Even if you're genetically predisposed to heart disease, you're not destined to have heart disease," said Devries, author of *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Cholesterol*.

The subtitle, *The latest natural treatments and scientific advances in one breakthrough program*, refers to an important point Devries wants to make -- You don't necessarily have to take prescription drugs to prevent heart disease and control cholesterol levels.

Devries is preventive cardiologist and associate professor of medicine, Division of Cardiology and Center for Integrative Medicine, Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago. That long title means he knows and understands the traditional ways to prevent heart disease, but he also knows and understands some non-traditional ways, such as meditating, taking supplements like fish oil, and testing for other factors in blood tests besides HDL, LDL and triglycerides.

Devries wrote the book because he thinks the public is interested in exploring more options when it comes to medicine, including prevention and alternative therapies.

"The public is driving the medical profession to wake up to prevention," he said. "But there's a lot out there that's confusing, some is misleading and some is slanted," he said. Some folks think prescriptions are poison, while others think supplements don't do anything, he said.

Devries takes the middle ground, and that's apparent in his book.



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He first discusses what traditional cholesterol tests can reveal. For example, he tells of a 39-year old woman who had a total cholesterol of 125, but had a low HDL level of 18, which should be closer to 50. Her physician didn't worry about it, but one day she had chest pains and an angiogram later showed that the woman had two arteries narrowed by 70 percent.

Other tests, not traditionally done during a cholesterol screening could signal problems. For example, high levels of C-reactive protein (CRP) "help predict heart attacks, strokes and sudden cardiac catastrophes," Devries wrote. "Furthermore, CRP can be better than standard cholesterol testing at assessing cardiovascular risk among women."

After the testing comes the decision on what preventive course to take. Devries explores various approaches including taking supplements such as fish oil, niacin and vitamin D, warning the reader not to begin taking these products without talking to a physician.

Fish oil can lower triglyceride levels and blood pressure and it works on LDL particle size as well.

Niacin is an alternative to statins, prescription drugs given to patients to lower their cholesterol. Each has its pluses and minuses, and Devries said the key is for patients to find what works for them and what gives them the least side effects.

Of course, exercise is important and Devries cites plenty of studies to show that physical activity, including aerobics and strength training can reduce heart disease. In fact, he calls exercise, "a therapy more potent than pills."

Devries admits that it's difficult for him to get the amount of exercise he thinks he needs, but he tries to engage his family in exercise routines when he comes home from work.

Massage, meditation and reiki, a type of energy healing, can also reduce the stress that can lead to heart disease, he said.

And now what you've been waiting to hear, America -- the most important way to stay heart healthy, in fact healthy overall.

"The most potent prevention is diet," said Devries. "I'm talking about the old Mediterranean style of eating, plenty of fruits and vegetables and fish."

OF course, we've heard the "diet" thing before, but Devries' book gives hope that different ways exist to help keep our hearts healthy. It also gives us the impetus to talk to our doctors more about the newest findings in the rapidly changing field of cardiovascular disease.

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