The Heart of Cardiovascular Risks

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People with HIV suffer from high rates of cardiovascular disease (CVD), but the virus appears less to blame than the same risk factors that affect the general population, according to new research published online in the journal AIDS.

The study took a look at 331 mostly male, treatment-naive HIV-positive participants who had no history of CVD or diabetes. Researchers conducted ultrasounds on participants' arteries for indicators of injury that may lead to CVD—specifically monitoring their carotid artery intima-media thickness and the flow-mediated vasodilation in their brachial artery, in other words, how thick the artery walls are and how well blood vessels relax. The researchers found that the most prominent risk factors included aging, body size, bad (LDL) cholesterol and a longer history of smoking. The results point to the importance of making healthy choices such as quitting smoking, eating healthfully and exercising regularly in order to reduce belly fat.

All this is not to say that HIV doesn't play a role in CVD. The study's lead author James Stein, MD, a professor of cardiovascular medicine at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, says that his as well as other research points to the value of treating HIV with antiretrovirals as yet another way to keep arteries healthy.

"The abnormalities of the immune system that accompany HIV lead to inflammation of the blood vessels," he explains.

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