Heart to Heart

Gender differences and HIV

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The risk of a heart attack for HIV-positive men is 1.5 times greater than for men without the virus. But women with HIV are three times as likely to experience such a health event compared with their HIV-negative peers.

Surprisingly, research published in the Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes examining this disparity has revealed that HIV-positive women's risk of heart attack was greater despite the fact that HIV-positive men are four times as likely as women to have coronary plaque, a major risk factor for heart attacks.

This seems to suggest that overlooked risk factors may be to blame for dissimilarities between the sexes concerning coronary problems, including, possibly, plaque lurking in smaller blood vessels in women. Furthermore, the findings suggest that biological sex differences likely factor into how HIV disease develops in individuals. This, in turn, serves as a warning to scientists not to apply the findings of studies involving only HIV-positive male participants to the diagnosis and treatment of women living with the virus.

Instead, analysts may want to follow the lead of researchers Markella Zanni, MD, at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, and her colleague Sara Looby, PhD. The two medical professionals examined the sex-based effects of HIV on heart disease to help physicians customize their care to more effectively serve their female patients.

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