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# HDL and Reverse Remnant-Cholesterol Transport (RRT): Relevance to Cardiovascular Disease

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1 **HDL and reverse remnant-cholesterol transport (RRT): Relevance to**  
2 **cardiovascular disease**

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13  
14  
15 **Keywords**

16  
17 HDL, triglyceride-rich lipoproteins, lipolysis, LPL, free cholesterol, remnants

18  
19  
20 **Abstract**

21  
22 Cardiovascular diseases predominantly result from atherosclerosis, a natural biological  
23 phenomenon reflecting food intake and energy production in humans. Lipolysis of plasma  
24 triglyceride-rich lipoproteins (TGRLs) by lipoprotein lipase is an essential element of energy  
25 production that delivers free fatty acids to peripheral cells. High-density lipoprotein (HDL)  
26 plays a key role in this process via acquirement of surface lipids, including free cholesterol,  
27 released upon TGRL lipolysis. According to the reverse remnant-cholesterol transport (RRT)  
28 hypothesis, such removal of cholesterol from remnant lipoproteins followed by transport to  
29 the liver with excretion into the bile may represent a major biological function of HDL  
30 essential for energy production, which can reduce cholesterol influx in the arterial wall by  
31 accelerating removal from circulation of atherogenic TGRL remnants.

32

# 1 HDL: A mystery wrapped in an enigma

2  
3 Low levels of plasma **high-density lipoprotein-cholesterol (HDL-C;** see Glossary) represent  
4 a well-known and widely employed cardiovascular risk factor [1]. Intriguingly, recent large-  
5 scale prospective epidemiological studies repeatedly document paradoxically increased  
6 cardiovascular and overall mortality at extremely high HDL-C levels (see Clinician's Corner),  
7 resulting in the U-shape relationship of the mortality with HDL-C [2-6]. The common belief  
8 that the higher HDL-C, the better does not therefore hold for extremely high concentrations  
9 [4]. Importantly, the relationship between low HDL-C and cardiovascular disease is typically  
10 weakened [2] and can disappear [7] in patients treated with **statins** which presently represent  
11 a standard of care.

12 The relationship between HDL-C and mortality is equally complex in subjects with  
13 genetically altered concentrations of HDL-C. Indeed, mutations in the *APOA1*, *ABCA1* and  
14 *LCAT* genes result in monogenic low HDL-C disorders which are inconsistently associated  
15 with cardiovascular risk and **atherosclerosis** [8]. Moreover, certain mutations resulting in  
16 extremely high concentrations of HDL-C, including those in the *SCARB1* and *CETP* genes,  
17 paradoxically increase cardiovascular risk [9, 10]. Elevated HDL-C concentrations resulting  
18 from alterations in the *CETP* gene are however more consistently associated with reduced  
19 cardiovascular disease [11], in parallel with decreased triglyceride, low-density lipoprotein-  
20 cholesterol (LDL-C) and **apolipoprotein (apo) B** levels. This observation reflects inherent  
21 difficulty of HDL-C epidemiology, which involves associations of altered HDL-C levels with  
22 other lipid traits, usually with plasma triglyceride concentrations [8]. In order to define  
23 specific contribution of HDL-C to cardiovascular disease, Mendelian randomization is  
24 employed using genetic variants that selectively modify HDL-C levels without influencing  
25 other lipid traits. This approach does not reveal causal relationships between HDL-C and risk  
26 of cardiovascular disease associated with *LIPG* variants [12] or HDL-C genetic scores [12,  
27 13]. However, other studies report that both *APOA1* and *ABCA1* mutations can markedly  
28 increase prevalence of cardiovascular disease in subjects with isolated low HDL-C [14].

29 To explain the association between low HDL-C and cardiovascular disease, the **HDL**  
30 hypothesis was developed by Miller and Miller who postulated that enhanced atherosclerosis  
31 is due to delayed cholesterol clearance from the arterial wall secondary to reduced HDL levels  
32 [15]. An existence of such **reverse cholesterol transport (RCT)** – which contrasts direct  
33 cholesterol transport from the liver and the intestine to other tissues - was earlier proposed by

1 Glomset [16]. The HDL hypothesis subsequently evolved into the RCT hypothesis which  
2 included, as major elements, efflux of free cholesterol from macrophages to HDL,  
3 esterification of free cholesterol by lecithin:cholesterol acyltransferase (LCAT) with HDL  
4 enlargement, and hepatic uptake of cholesteryl ester from HDL followed by its conversion  
5 into bile salts which are excreted [17]. The hypothesis assumes that the major atheroprotective  
6 function of HDL involves cholesterol efflux from arterial wall cells and that altered  
7 metabolism of HDL results in the defective efflux and accelerates atherosclerosis. Such HDL  
8 flux hypothesis is primarily based on negative associations of cardiovascular disease with in  
9 vitro measurements of cellular cholesterol efflux from lipid-loaded macrophages [17]. HDL  
10 equally displays other atheroprotective functions which can be compromised in metabolic  
11 diseases associated with low HDL-C and accelerated atherosclerosis [18]. The HDL  
12 hypothesis was therefore revised into the HDL function hypothesis which states that  
13 atheroprotection is causatively related not to HDL-C but to a cardioprotective HDL function  
14 which cannot always be estimated through the HDL-C assay [8, 17].

15 The major difficulty of the RCT hypothesis includes absence of convincing data documenting  
16 removal of cholesterol from human atherosclerotic intima through RCT [19]. Another  
17 difficulty involves lack of meaningful relationship between RCT and HDL-C. Indeed,  
18 measurements of RCT in humans using labelled cholesterol reveal absence of correlation  
19 between tissue cholesterol efflux and HDL-C [20]. This finding agrees with the observation  
20 that cholesterol efflux from tissue macrophages provides only a small contribution to HDL-C  
21 levels if any [21]. Finally, the RCT pathway can hardly be envisioned to be developed  
22 through evolution as cardiovascular disease typically affects humans after their reproductive  
23 age [19].

24 Importantly, the HDL function hypotheses do not provide explanation for the non-linear U-  
25 shape association between HDL-C and cardiovascular disease. While HDL function is often  
26 deficient at low HDL-C [18], data on the HDL function in subjects with extremely high HDL-  
27 C are scarce. Cholesterol movement via the RCT pathway is however unlikely to be deficient  
28 in such subjects as cholesterol efflux capacity of their HDL is enhanced, rather than reduced  
29 [22, 23]. Interestingly, anti-inflammatory activity of HDL can be deficient in coronary heart  
30 disease (CHD) patients with extremely high HDL-C [24]. However, in this study HDL was  
31 equally dysfunctional in subjects with normal HDL-C. In addition, angiogenic properties of  
32 HDL are weakened at high HDL concentrations [25]. Relevance of this pathway to human  
33 atherogenesis however remains to be established.

1 The classic view of HDL metabolism centred on the RCT pathway has recently been revisited  
2 by several studies. Earlier isotopic studies reveal that cholesteryl esters are predominantly  
3 delivered to the liver from apoB-containing **lipoproteins** rather than from HDL in humans  
4 [26, 27]. By contrast, free cholesterol is readily taken up from HDL by the liver and secreted  
5 in the bile or utilized for bile acid synthesis [26, 27]. Isotopic studies in humans equally  
6 demonstrate that the majority of tissue cholesterol efflux occurs via free cholesterol which is  
7 rapidly redistributed among plasma lipoproteins [20, 28]. Furthermore, isotopic studies in  
8 mice show that while most free cholesterol is rapidly extracted from nascent HDL by the liver  
9 via scavenger receptor class B type I (SR-BI), free cholesterol esterification by LCAT is a  
10 minor process in HDL metabolism [29]. Most free cholesterol is thereby rapidly transferred  
11 from HDL to the liver independent of LCAT activity [29]. Indeed, the flux of free cholesterol  
12 is an order of magnitude faster than that of cholesteryl esters [29]. Consistent with these data,  
13 endogenous isotopic labelling provides little evidence for progressive enlargement of HDL in  
14 humans, revealing that HDL is secreted into the circulation in its entire size distribution from  
15 very small to very large particles [30]. In this model, RCT can still be active but mainly  
16 within rather than among the HDL sizes [30], primarily involving movement of free  
17 cholesterol [29].

18 With low plasma HDL-C established as cardiovascular risk factor, the concept of therapeutic  
19 HDL-C raising gained popularity several decades ago as a novel approach to reduce  
20 cardiovascular disease [18]. Emphasis on HDL-C as a therapeutic target however resulted in  
21 multiple failures involving cholesteryl ester transfer protein (CETP) inhibitors, fibrates, niacin  
22 and other agents. CETP inhibitors potently increase HDL-C and less potently decrease LDL-  
23 C, triglycerides and apoB, exerting a spectre of clinical effects which vary from deleterious  
24 off-target to modestly beneficial [31]. Fibrates and niacin moderately raise HDL-C, more  
25 potently reduce triglycerides and can decrease cardiovascular risk in patients not treated by  
26 statins [32]. Subgroup analysis suggests that statin-treated patients with elevated triglyceride  
27 levels and low HDL-C might still benefit from these agents [33].

28 The negative results of HDL-C-raising trials can potentially be accounted for by excessive  
29 HDL-C-raising, consistent with elevated mortality observed at extremely high HDL-C in  
30 epidemiological studies [2-6]. The absence of clinical benefit may equally reflect lack of  
31 beneficial effect on atheroprotective HDL functions. However, HDL from subjects treated  
32 with CETP inhibitors or niacin display enhanced, rather than reduced, cholesterol efflux  
33 capacity from macrophages [31, 34].

1 It is of key importance that all modern large-scale clinical trials of HDL-C-raising agents  
2 were performed in patients treated by statins. In contrast to earlier trials carried out in the pre-  
3 statin era, HDL-C-raising on a background of statin treatment did not exert expected  
4 beneficial effects on cardiovascular disease [32]. Indeed, HDL-C-raising drugs were only  
5 efficient at high baseline LDL-C [35].

6 Together, epidemiology, biological function, metabolism and therapeutic targeting of HDL  
7 are difficult to reconcile within the existing concepts. As lipoprotein metabolism represents an  
8 intricate network of pathways linking different lipoprotein classes, a broader look at HDL in  
9 the context of its relationships to other lipoproteins, primarily to those rich in triglycerides,  
10 may allow revisiting our view of this enigmatic particle. More specifically, closer analysis of  
11 the role of triglycerides in cardiovascular disease unexpectedly proves useful to resolve the  
12 HDL controversy.

## 13 **Metabolic links between HDL and TGRL: The mystery is** 14 **opening**

### 15 *Non-lipolytic and lipolytic pathways*

16 Intravascular HDL metabolism is intimately linked to that of **triglyceride-rich lipoproteins**  
17 (**TGRL**), a phenomenon which is frequently manifested as a negative correlation between  
18 plasma levels of HDL-C and triglycerides [36, 37]. In the circulation, HDL and TGRL  
19 interact via multiple metabolic pathways a most studied of which includes heteroexchange of  
20 core lipids mediated by CETP. Plasma CETP primarily mediates heteroexchange of  
21 cholesteryl esters and triglycerides between spherical HDL and TGRL, resulting in the  
22 formation of triglyceride-enriched HDL and cholesteryl ester-enriched TGRL.

23 Another key, but frequently overlooked, pathway linking HDL and TGRL involves transfer to  
24 HDL of surface remnants generated during TGRL lipolysis by **lipoprotein lipase (LPL)** [28,  
25 38]. Lipolysis of TGRLs is an essential element of energy production in mammals aimed at  
26 supplying peripheral tissues with free fatty acids. This process delivers high amounts of free  
27 cholesterol to HDL and constitutes a quantitatively major source of circulating HDL-C,  
28 accounting for up to 50% of its variation [39]. When TGRLs (chylomicrons and very low-  
29 density lipoprotein (VLDL)) enter blood circulation, their triglycerides are lipolysed to free  
30 fatty acids by LPL on the surface of the endothelium with a shrinkage of the hydrophobic  
31 lipoprotein core and production of smaller-size, higher-density remnant TGRL also called  
32 core remnants [40-42]. Excess molecules of the surface monolayer surrounding the

1 hydrophobic core are shed from the particles in a form of surface remnants; such molecules  
2 include surface apolipoproteins, phospholipids and free cholesterol. Most of the excess  
3 material comes off as unstable bilayer sheets which can form large-size vesicular structures  
4 [43]. In addition, small discoid pre-beta HDL particles can be assembled directly from  
5 apolipoproteins and surface lipids of TGRL [41].

### 6 *Mass transfer to HDL during lipolysis*

7 The surface remnants of TGRL predominantly fuse with HDL, adding material to plasma  
8 HDL pool which thereby helps converting remnants to new HDL particles [43]. LPL-  
9 mediated lipolysis is a rate-limiting step of TGRL catabolism. Both LPL activity and  
10 fractional catabolic rate of VLDL apoB and triglycerides are positively correlated with plasma  
11 HDL-C, revealing that HDL-C is directly associated with the removal rate of postprandial  
12 lipoproteins from human circulation [28, 38, 39]. Variations in LPL activity may account for a  
13 considerable portion of the variability in HDL-C levels, indicating that HDL-C represents an  
14 index of LPL activity and a biomarker of TGRL lipolysis by LPL [38, 44].  
15 HDL can readily acquire both polar (free cholesterol, phospholipid) and non-polar  
16 (cholesteryl ester, triglyceride) lipids. The potent lipid-acquiring properties underlie efficient  
17 lipid transfer to HDL during TGRL lipolysis. In vitro experiments extensively document  
18 transfer of surface components, including free cholesterol, phospholipid and apolipoproteins  
19 A-I, A-II, C-II, C-III and E, from TGRL to HDL upon lipolysis [28, 40, 42, 43, 45, 46]. Such  
20 transfer can be traced using isotopic technique, demonstrating that in subjects receiving  
21 radiolabelled cholesterol orally, radioactivity peak in TGRL precedes that in HDL [47].

22 **Formation of large HDL.** Addition of LPL to serum results in the accumulation of large,  
23 light HDL2 particles paralleled by a decrease in small, dense HDL3 in vitro [48]. The size of  
24 the acceptor HDL particles is increased following TGRL lipolysis, whereas their density is  
25 reduced [38, 40, 43].

26 Similarly, HDL reveals enlarged size, elevated molecular mass and diminished density after  
27 fat meal in vivo [49, 50]. Levels of large, light HDL2 are increased, while those of small,  
28 dense HDL3 can be either increased or slightly decreased after fat meal [49, 50]. The content  
29 of many constituents, including phospholipid, protein (primarily **apoA-I**), free cholesterol,  
30 cholesteryl esters and triglycerides, can be elevated in HDL2 and HDL3 after fat meal [49,  
31 50], although cholesteryl esters are typically not accumulated in postprandial HDL and can  
32 even be depleted, resulting in a null effect on HDL-C.

1 Underlying mechanisms involve transfer of surface constituents from TGRL predominantly to  
2 HDL3, which is enlarged to become HDL2 [49], or to both HDL2 and HDL3 [50]. Small,  
3 dense, lipid-poor HDL3 particles represent preferential acceptors for surface lipids released  
4 from TGRL during lipolysis [51]. Interestingly, small pre-beta HDL containing apoA-I and  
5 phospholipid can be released from HDL as a result of the transfer of surface material from  
6 TGRL during lipolysis [38]. In this process, spherical HDL combined with the surface  
7 remnants grows in size, releasing pre-beta HDL [52]. Transfer of phospholipid and free  
8 cholesterol to HDL3 enhances LCAT-mediated formation of cholesteryl esters, facilitating  
9 conversion of HDL3 into HDL2 [50]. As a result, there is a precursor-product relationship  
10 between TGRL surface components and HDL2 mediated by HDL3 [38]. High plasma HDL  
11 concentrations can therefore be both a result and a cause of efficient clearance of plasma  
12 TGRL as occurs in females vs. males, alcohol users vs. non-users, and upon physical activity  
13 [38].

14 **Molecular mechanisms.** Torcetrapib, specific CETP inhibitor, enhances accumulation of  
15 fluorescent cholesterol in HDL upon TGRL lipolysis by LPL [51], probably reflecting  
16 inhibition of CETP-mediated transfer of cholesteryl esters from HDL to TGRL following  
17 esterification of free cholesterol by LCAT. In support of this mechanism, transfer of  
18 cholesteryl esters from HDL to VLDL is enhanced when CETP is added to the mixture of  
19 VLDL, HDL and LPL [53]. Furthermore, LCAT inhibition by iodoacetamide increases  
20 accumulation of fluorescent cholesterol in HDL upon TGRL lipolysis [51], consistent with the  
21 multi-step mechanism of free cholesterol movement between HDL and TGRL upon LPL-  
22 induced lipolysis in which LCAT acts in concert with CETP to promote removal of  
23 cholesterol from HDL back to TGRL (as well as to LDL) following its esterification. Such  
24 continuous flow of cholesterol through HDL mediated by LCAT and CETP may underlie the  
25 observation of largely stable concentrations of HDL-C in the postprandial phase [49, 50].

26 **Formation of TGRL remnants.** Presence of HDL facilitates TGRL lipolysis, removing  
27 lipids and proteins released during this process [43]. Lipolysis of human VLDL by LPL in the  
28 presence of HDL results in accelerated decrease in VLDL content of cholesterol and  
29 formation of both VLDL core and surface remnants [43]. The surface remnants form  
30 liposome-like vesicles in the presence of low levels of HDL and are assimilated into HDL to  
31 form larger HDL particles in the presence of excess HDL [54]. Such acquirement of surface  
32 TGRL remnants may represent a key biological function of HDL which may prevent their  
33 accumulation in the arterial wall as originally proposed by Chung et al. [43, 54]. In addition,



1 the removal of excess surface remnants by HDL can facilitate hepatic uptake of core remnants  
2 [55].

3 **Role of apoA-I.** ApoA-I represents a typical amphipathic protein which binds avidly to lipids  
4 [56, 57]. Such properties render apoA-I a potent biological detergent which interacts with  
5 minimal amounts of lipids present in aqueous phase, instantly transforming them into highly  
6 organised, stable, micellar lipoprotein complexes in the HDL density range [56, 57].  
7 Solubilisation of lipids (e.g. upon cholesterol efflux from peripheral cells or across small  
8 intestine) may therefore represent a major function of apoA-I [58]. Other biological activities  
9 of apoA-I, including its potent anti-inflammatory and antioxidative properties [18], can  
10 similarly reflect binding of pro-inflammatory and oxidised lipids [24]. In addition, apoA-I  
11 forms complexes with proteins displaying prominent anti-atherosclerotic and anti-  
12 inflammatory properties, such as paraoxonase 1, further enhancing atheroprotection [59].  
13 The liver is traditionally thought of to represent the major site of apoA-I production.  
14 However, apoA-I is equally synthesised actively throughout the small intestine. Upon  
15 production, apoA-I is secreted by the intestine into the lymph in a process which is central for  
16 the metabolism of exogenous lipids. Together with the liver, the ileum is a principal source of  
17 newly synthesized apoA-I [60]. ApoA-I synthesis and secretion into the lymph increase with  
18 lipid absorption [61]. Intestinal apoA-I thereby provides a major contribution to plasma apoA-  
19 I levels, which can reach 30-40% of total plasma apoA-I supply in humans [61]. In rats,  
20 intestine produces over 50% of total apoA-I, with the liver producing the rest [62].  
21 The intestine secretes apoA-I as a part of two lipoprotein species, chylomicrons and discoid  
22 nascent HDL [60, 61]. Chylomicron-associated apoA-I accounts for 60-80% of total apoA-I  
23 in lymph [63]. Intriguingly, apoA-I prevails among apolipoproteins of chylomicrons, while  
24 apoB is a quantitatively minor component (3.4 wt% of total protein in humans) [61]. In  
25 intestinal lymph, apoA-I accounts for 15-35 wt% of total chylomicron protein, with apoB and  
26 apoA-IV accounting for 10% each, while the contribution of apoCs prevails at 42-50% [41,  
27 64]. ApoA-I is also a major protein component of chylomicrons from mesenteric lymph in  
28 rats (56 wt%) [61]. Remarkably, the apolipoprotein composition of chylomicrons resembles  
29 that of HDL [61].  
30 Following secretion, most of chylomicron apoA-I is transferred to HDL during lipoprotein  
31 catabolism. Similar transfers occur when chylomicrons are incubated with plasma in vitro  
32 [65]. The main reason why apoA-I needs to be removed from TGRLs upon their lipolysis

1 appears to involve the necessity to pick up surface lipids released during this process, leading  
2 to the formation of HDL [54].

3

## 4 **TGRLs: Unravelling the enigma**

### 5 *Epidemiology and genetics*

6 **Triglycerides.** Association of high triglyceride levels with cardiovascular risk has recently  
7 been established in large-scale epidemiological studies using multivariate models [37, 66].  
8 Genetic evidence obtained in Mendelian randomization studies supports raised concentrations  
9 of triglycerides being causally related to cardiovascular and all-cause mortality [36]. Specific  
10 genetic mechanisms that affect the LPL pathway, increase plasma triglycerides and augment  
11 cardiovascular risk include loss of function of LPL and gain of function of apoC-III, apoA-V  
12 and ANGPTL4 [37, 67].

13 Complete LPL deficiency is not considered atherogenic in humans. Indeed, extremely large  
14 size of TGRL particles accumulated in this condition precludes their entry in the arterial wall  
15 [36]. However, partial LPL deficiency is associated with elevated plasma triglycerides,  
16 reduced HDL-C and increased odds of CHD, while gain-of-function LPL variants are  
17 cardioprotective [68]. By contrast, mutations of APOC3 result in decreased plasma apoC-III,  
18 triglycerides, apoB and LDL-C, increased HDL-C and reduced CHD risk [66, 67].

19 Mechanistically, the association between apoC-III and cardiovascular disease primarily  
20 reflects inhibitory effects of the protein towards triglyceride lipolysis and hepatic uptake of  
21 TGRL remnants [37] and may reflect deleterious effects on HDL function [69].

22 **Remnant cholesterol.** Circulating TGRLs are not directly atherogenic and become  
23 deleterious upon their conversion to smaller-size remnant particles [36]. Such TGRL  
24 remnants are enriched in cholesterol, carrying 5 to 50 times more cholesterol per particle than  
25 LDL [37] and accounting for up to one-third of total plasma cholesterol [70]. As a result,  
26 **remnant cholesterol can** be even more atherogenic than LDL-C [71]. While remnant  
27 cholesterol is often calculated using LDL-C according to the Friedewald's formula, resulting in  
28 a direct relationship with plasma triglycerides, the association with cardiovascular disease  
29 holds when remnant cholesterol is measured directly [72]. Because triglycerides can be  
30 degraded by most cells, but cholesterol cannot be degraded by any, cholesterol content of  
31 TGRLs is more likely to be the cause of atherosclerosis and cardiovascular disease than raised

1 triglycerides [36]. High triglyceride concentrations can therefore be considered as a marker  
2 for high concentrations of TGRL remnants rich in cholesterol [36].

3 As plasma levels of remnant cholesterol parallel those of triglycerides and the latter are  
4 inversely correlated with HDL-C, remnant cholesterol is equally correlated negatively with  
5 HDL-C [72, 73], indicating that low HDL-C can be regarded as a biomarker of both high  
6 triglycerides and high remnant cholesterol levels [36, 73]. As mutual adjustments can  
7 eliminate associations with CHD of HDL-C and TG [74], these lipid traits may influence  
8 cardiovascular disease through the same processes.

### 9 *Metabolism*

10 Altered metabolism of TGRL particles results in the accumulation in the circulation of TGRL  
11 remnants which can be cytotoxic, pro-inflammatory and pro-atherogenic, inducing cholesterol  
12 accumulation in arterial wall macrophages [37, 75]. In support of this notion, electron  
13 microscopy reveals that atherosclerotic lesions in both humans and experimental animals  
14 contain numerous, large, extracellular, liposome-like particles, which differ from extracellular  
15 VLDL- and LDL-like particles and intracellular lipid droplets [54]. Such in vivo derived  
16 particles are similar to liposome-like lipolytic surface remnants of TGRL produced during in  
17 vitro lipolysis [54]. Moreover, early post-mortem human atherosclerotic plaques contain a  
18 large part of cholesterol in a form of liposome-like particles [54]. Consistent with these data,  
19 such plaques contain numerous particles rich in free cholesterol but poor in cholesteryl esters,  
20 which are present before foam cells start to accumulate [76]. In addition, atherosclerotic  
21 lesions present with large amounts of non-lipoprotein-associated lipid which can originate  
22 from lipolysis [77].

### 23 *Therapeutic targeting*

24 Plasma triglyceride levels can be decreased by supplementation with polyunsaturated fatty  
25 acids. When statin-treated patients possessing elevated triglycerides received 2 g of icosapent  
26 ethyl twice daily in the REDUCE-IT trial, the risk of ischemic events, including  
27 cardiovascular death, was decreased by -25% relative to placebo paralleled by a decrease in  
28 triglycerides of -18.3% [78]. In addition, reduction of apoC-III is associated with improved  
29 lipoprotein profile and can be considered as a promising approach to reduce cardiovascular  
30 disease via triglyceride lowering [79]. Therapeutic modulation of the LPL pathway thereby  
31 bears a potential to reduce both triglyceride levels and the risk of CHD.

32

# 1 **RRT hypothesis: The mystery solved?**

## 2 *The hypothesis*

3 Computed tomographic findings of atherosclerosis in ancient cultures [80] together with fatty  
4 streak formation in human fetal aortas [81] reveal that human atherosclerosis is a natural  
5 process. A natural way of atherogenesis was originally described by Moreton who proposed  
6 that lipid particles are retained and deposited in the arterial intima from the plasma-derived  
7 nutrient lymph stream to be phagocyted by macrophages with the formation of foam cells  
8 [82]. Later developed by Zilversmit [83], the concept of atherosclerosis as a postprandial  
9 phenomenon is supported by recent epidemiological findings of the association of elevated  
10 levels of postprandial triglycerides and remnant TGRL with cardiovascular disease [36].  
11 Together with the data on natural history of atherosclerosis, this concept can be interpreted in  
12 such a way that atherogenesis represents an undesirable, but inevitable, consequence of food  
13 intake and energy production, being a common biological phenomenon in humans.  
14 According to the widely accepted ‘response-to-retention’ model of atherosclerosis [84],  
15 retention of cholesterol-rich, apoB-containing **remnant lipoproteins** within the arterial wall  
16 is the key initiating event in atherogenesis. The presence of HDL allows eliminating from  
17 circulation both surface and core remnants of TGRL which can otherwise accumulate in the  
18 arterial wall and induce atherosclerosis [43]. Given its presence in lower vertebrates and  
19 predominance in most species, HDL must play an important biological role from an  
20 evolutionary standpoint and can be important for survival [19]. The central place of HDL in  
21 the postprandial lipid metabolism and energy production provides an excellent example of  
22 such a role, which can be particularly important in small animals, such as rodents, presenting  
23 with elevated energy requirements and accelerated lipid metabolism in the postprandial state.  
24 The atheroprotective role of HDL can thereby be secondary to its role in TGRL lipolysis,  
25 reflecting its capacity to indirectly, but potently, reduce cholesterol influx in the arterial wall  
26 by ensuring proper removal from circulation of cholesterol-rich TGRL remnants. This  
27 pathway exemplifies the long-sought mechanism underlying HDL-mediated protection from  
28 cardiovascular disease, which both provides a major contribution to HDL-C levels and  
29 maintains low levels of cholesterol in the artery wall [85].  
30 Steady-state concentrations of HDL-C may represent a biomarker of the removal of remnant  
31 TGRL cholesterol through the plasma compartment. Indeed, transfer of free cholesterol from  
32 TGRL upon LPL-induced lipolysis represents a major source of HDL-C in humans [38, 44].

1 Importantly, the contribution of this pathway to HDL-C exceeds that provided by cholesterol  
2 efflux from all extra-hepatic tissues combined, and even more so from arterial wall cells [86].  
3 Mechanistically, free cholesterol acquirement by HDL upon TGRL lipolysis can primarily be  
4 mediated by lipoprotein complexes containing apoA-I which ensures proper structure and  
5 function of HDL particles essential for shuttling excess surface lipids through the bloodstream  
6 [56, 57]. Formation of such complexes may represent a key biological role of intestinally-  
7 derived, chylomicron-associated apoA-I [64]. While apoA-I can solubilise excess surface  
8 lipids released from TGRL upon lipolysis, HDL phospholipid may provide lipid surface  
9 required for their absorption [41, 43, 54].

10 Together, these considerations can be combined within a **reverse remnant-cholesterol**  
11 **transport (RRT)** hypothesis (Box 1) which involves acquirement by plasma HDL of surface  
12 remnants, including free cholesterol, of TGRL upon intravascular lipolysis by LPL with  
13 subsequent transport of remnant-derived cholesterol to the liver in a pathway which originates  
14 in the intestine with the secretion of apoA-I and cholesterol in chylomicrons followed by their  
15 transport to plasma via lymph (Figure 1). Remnant-derived free cholesterol can thereby be  
16 esterified under the action of LCAT before being transferred from HDL to the liver either  
17 directly via SR-BI or through apoB-containing lipoproteins and their hepatic receptors,  
18 though the both pathways can handle both free and esterified cholesterol [29, 87]. The latter  
19 pathway can quantitatively prevail in humans [26, 27], delivering cholesterol from HDL to  
20 apoB-containing particles via both CETP-dependent and independent mechanisms [88].

21 The RRT hypothesis implies that lipolytic free cholesterol transfer from TGRL to HDL is  
22 impaired under metabolic conditions associated with cardiovascular disease, leading to the  
23 accumulation of remnant-derived cholesterol in the arterial wall (Figure 2). Available data  
24 indeed demonstrate that the rate of this process can be diminished at both low and extremely  
25 high HDL-C, consistent with the U-shape epidemiology (Box 1). Such impaired free  
26 cholesterol transfer to HDL upon lipolysis may result from decreased levels of acceptor HDL  
27 particles, their altered profile and composition as well as from alterations in lipid transport  
28 proteins and enzymes, and is frequently accompanied by elevated levels of triglycerides (Box  
29 2).

### 31 *Therapeutic corollary*

32 The RRT hypothesis allows revisiting our view of therapies modulating HDL metabolism.  
33 The outcome of HDL-C-raising approaches was proposed to depend on the mechanism by

1 which HDL-C is raised [89]. According to the RRT hypothesis, HDL-C-raising can be  
2 cardioprotective when it accelerates removal from circulation of atherogenic TGRL remnants  
3 and is accompanied by a reduction of remnant cholesterol (Figure 2). Rather than enhancing  
4 cholesterol efflux from macrophages as proposed by the RCT model, novel approaches should  
5 focus at diminishing cholesterol influx into macrophages from remnant lipoproteins. Such  
6 concept can be considered preventive, in contrast to the curative approach of the enhanced  
7 RCT.

8 **LPL pathway.** As LPL pathway provides major contributions to circulating levels of both  
9 HDL-C and triglycerides, regulation of this pathway appears most promising in the  
10 framework of RRT. Indeed, HDL-C levels can be efficiently raised by LPL activation in  
11 parallel to decreasing plasma triglycerides [90]. Experiments with apoC-III antisense  
12 oligonucleotides reveal sustained reductions in plasma triglycerides, VLDL-cholesterol,  
13 VLDL apoB, apoB-48, VLDL particle number and plasma apoC-III in vivo [91]. In parallel,  
14 HDL-C is elevated in CETP-expressing species [79].

15 **ApoA-I synthesis.** Metabolic states in which apoA-I levels are high can be expected to result  
16 in efficient removal of surface lipids from TGRL undergoing lipolysis, fostering efficient  
17 triglyceride catabolism and HDL formation [92]. Other biological activities of apoA-I can  
18 further contribute to cardioprotection [18]. Interestingly, epidemiological data suggest that  
19 apoA-I may represent a more relevant therapeutic target as compared to HDL-C [89].

20 **Statins.** Statin treatment eliminates, or greatly reduces, potential therapeutic benefits of HDL-  
21 C-raising in cardiovascular disease [32]. Acting via enhanced hepatic expression of LDL  
22 receptors, statins can accelerate removal of atherogenic core TGRL remnants in a pathway  
23 which may overlap with that stimulated by HDL. Benefits of statins can be derived from both  
24 LDL-C lowering and HDL-C raising [93], with the latter potentially reflecting enhanced free  
25 cholesterol flux through the lipolytic pathway. Consistent with this possibility, low baseline  
26 HDL-C and high baseline triglycerides are strong, independent predictors of high HDL-C  
27 elevation induced by statins [94].

28

## 29 **Concluding remarks**

30 The RRT hypothesis provides a framework for revisiting our present view of HDL  
31 metabolism, incorporating unexpected and paradoxical results of recent large-scale trials and

1 epidemiological studies. Inevitably leaving numerous questions open (see Outstanding  
2 Questions), the hypothesis links the complex U-shape relationship between HDL-C and  
3 cardiovascular disease [2-6] to free cholesterol transfer to HDL upon TGRL lipolysis by LPL  
4 [51]. Indeed, inverse U-shape relationships between the latter functional metric and HDL-C  
5 result in linear and negative relationships of free cholesterol transfer to HDL with  
6 cardiovascular and overall mortality obtained from epidemiological studies, in clear contrast  
7 to the U-shape relationships observed for HDL-C [51].

8 From a diagnostic point of view, HDL capacity to acquire free cholesterol upon TGRL  
9 lipolysis by LPL in vitro may provide a superior biomarker of cardiovascular risk as  
10 compared to plasma HDL-C levels [51]. Plasma concentration of HDL-C can therefore be  
11 considered as an imperfect static measure of cholesterol flux through this dynamic pathway,  
12 which is directly associated with the efficacy of cholesterol removal from circulation only at  
13 low-to-normal HDL-C. The lipolytic FC transfer from TGRL to HDL can however still be  
14 limited in its capacity to predict cardiovascular risk as suggested by the presence of moderate  
15 hypertriglyceridemia and absence of accelerated atherosclerosis in some forms of low HDL-C  
16 **dyslipidemias**, such as in carriers of apoA-I Milano [8]. Another weakness of the RRT  
17 hypothesis that requires further studies involves absence of clear links to inflammatory and  
18 infectious diseases.

19 Although HDL exerts a plethora of other biological activities, none of them is known to be  
20 reduced at both low and extremely high concentrations of HDL and can thereby account for  
21 the U-shape relationship between HDL-C levels and cardiovascular disease. This relationship  
22 may therefore primarily reflect the lipid acceptor role of HDL in lipolysis. Novel therapies  
23 targeting HDL metabolism should therefore focus primarily at the acceleration of lipolytic  
24 cholesterol fluxes through the RRT pathway.

25

1 **Figure legends**

2

3 **Figure 1: Reverse remnant-cholesterol transport (RRT) pathway.** (A) Upon triglyceride  
4 (TG) lipolysis by LPL, triglyceride-rich lipoproteins (TGRL) are converted into core and  
5 surface remnants. Core remnants are cleared by hepatic LDL receptors (LDL-R). Surface  
6 remnants contain free cholesterol (FC), phospholipid (PL) and apolipoproteins (apos) which  
7 combine with the plasma HDL pool, resulting in FC esterification by LCAT and enlargement  
8 of HDL particles. Their FC and cholesteryl ester (CE) are transported to the liver directly via  
9 SR-BI (in green) or indirectly via apoB-containing lipoproteins. The traditional reverse  
10 cholesterol transport (RCT) pathway from the arterial wall is shown as dotted lines.  
11 Lipoprotein components are in orange, and enzymes and lipid transfer proteins in blue.  
12 (B) ApoA-I is secreted by the intestine as a constituent of chylomicrons which are  
13 transported to the blood through the lymph and form a pool of plasma TGRL, together with  
14 hepatically produced very low-density lipoprotein (VLDL).

15

16 **Figure 2: Atherosclerosis and potential sites of therapeutic intervention.** Free cholesterol  
17 transfer from plasma triglyceride-rich lipoproteins (TGRL) to high-density lipoproteins  
18 (HDL) can be impaired (red circles) when (1) TGRL lipolysis is inhibited (LPL deficiency,  
19 gain-of-function mutations of apoC-III), (2) levels of acceptor HDL particles are reduced  
20 (CHD, AMI, Type 2 diabetes, apoA-I deficiency, ABCA1 deficiency), (3) the particles are  
21 already enriched in FC (extremely high HDL-C), and/or (4) cholesterol transfer under the  
22 action of CETP and LCAT from HDL back to TGRL is enhanced (elevated CETP activity).  
23 Clearance of remnant cholesterol is delayed and the remnants can enter the arterial wall (red  
24 dotted arrows), deposit cholesterol and cause atherosclerosis. Potential sites of therapeutic  
25 intervention (green circles) to accelerate cholesterol removal through the RRT pathway  
26 include activation of TGRL lipolysis by LPL (a) and enhanced apoA-I production (b).

27



1 **Glossary**

2

3 **Apolipoprotein (apo):** Protein that binds and transports lipids in a form of lipoproteins in the  
4 circulatory and lymphatic systems; target lipids to receptors at sites of degradation, storage,  
5 transformation and recycling

6

7 **Apolipoprotein A-I (apoA-I):** Potent biological detergent and major apolipoprotein of HDL  
8 that ensures structure of HDL particles and endows them with specific biological functions  
9 which primarily involve lipid binding

10

11 **Atherosclerosis:** Pathological process that typically underlies cardiovascular morbidity and  
12 mortality via formation of atherosclerotic plaques, resulting from the progressive  
13 accumulation of cholesterol and other lipids in native and oxidized forms, extracellular matrix  
14 and inflammatory cells, in the intima and media of the arterial wall

15

16 **Dyslipidemia:** A disorder of lipoprotein metabolism, which may include specific lipoprotein  
17 overproduction or deficiency

18

19 **High-density lipoprotein (HDL):** A class of cholesterol-rich lipoprotein particles which are  
20 small, dense, lipid-poor and protein-rich as compared to other lipoproteins of human plasma.  
21 Human HDL particles are typically spherical with a diameter of 7-12 nm, molecular mass of  
22 80-450 kDa and density of 1.063-1.21 g/ml

23

24 **High-density lipoprotein-cholesterol (HDL-C):** Cholesterol carried by HDL. Low levels of  
25 plasma HDL-C are associated with cardiovascular disease and are widely used as a  
26 cardiovascular risk factor in clinical practice. Cholesterol carried by HDL is colloquially  
27 referred to as “good cholesterol”

28

29 **Lipoprotein:** Plurimolecular, quasi-spherical, pseudomicellar complex composed of lipids  
30 solubilised by proteins possessing specialised structure and function, the apolipoproteins

31

32 **Lipoprotein lipase (LPL):** Key enzyme of lipoprotein metabolism present on the blood  
33 endothelium to ensure lipolysis of triglycerides in TGRL with a release of free fatty acids

34

1 **Remnant cholesterol:** Cholesterol carried by remnant TGRLs  
2  
3 **Remnant lipoproteins** (also termed remnant TGRL): Native TGRLs partially lipolysed by  
4 LPL. Include chylomicron remnants and VLDL remnants, such as intermediate-density  
5 lipoprotein (IDL)  
6  
7 **Reverse cholesterol transport (RCT):** Transfer of cholesterol from peripheral cells to the  
8 liver for excretion into the bile  
9  
10 **Reverse remnant-cholesterol transport (RRT):** Transfer of cholesterol from TGRL  
11 remnants to HDL upon LPL-induced lipolysis followed by transport of the remnant-derived  
12 cholesterol to the liver for excretion into the bile  
13  
14 **Statins:** Class of lipid-lowering drugs that inhibit 3-hydroxy-3-methyl-glutaryl-coenzyme A  
15 (HMG-CoA) reductase, a key enzyme of hepatic cholesterol biosynthesis, decrease plasma  
16 levels of low-density lipoprotein-cholesterol (LDL-C) and reduce cardiovascular mortality  
17  
18 **Triglyceride-rich lipoprotein (TGRL):** Large, light, lipid-rich and protein-poor lipoproteins  
19 of intestinal (chylomicrons) and hepatic (very low-density lipoprotein and intermediate-  
20 density lipoprotein) origin. TGRLs predominantly carry triglycerides which are lipolysed  
21 under the action of LPL to release free fatty acids taken up by tissues as a source of energy.  
22 TGRLs are therefore essential for energy production  
23  
24

## 1 Clinician's Corner

- 2
- 3 ○ Low plasma levels of HDL-C represent a well-known and widely employed  
4 cardiovascular risk factor. Both cardiovascular and overall mortality are however  
5 increased at extremely high HDL-C levels, resulting in the U-shape relationship with  
6 HDL-C. Therapeutic HDL-C-raising in patients treated with statins resulted in multiple  
7 failures involving CETP inhibitors, fibrates, niacin, reconstituted HDL infusions and  
8 other approaches  
9
  - 10 ○ Lipolysis of TGRLs is an essential element of energy production. Elevated  
11 concentrations of triglycerides are causally associated with cardiovascular risk and  
12 represent biomarkers of atherogenic, cholesterol-rich remnant TGRL. Altered  
13 metabolism of TGRL results in the remnant accumulation in the arterial wall and  
14 atherosclerosis, a natural process which represents undesirable, but inevitable,  
15 consequence of TGRL lipolysis, food intake and energy production. A key pathway  
16 linking HDL and TGRL involves transfer to HDL of surface, cholesterol-containing  
17 remnants generated during TGRL lipolysis by lipoprotein lipase (LPL). Acquisition of  
18 surface lipids released upon TGRL lipolysis by LPL may represent a key biological  
19 function of HDL essential for energy production. The atheroprotective function of HDL  
20 can be secondary to its role in TGRL lipolysis, indirectly reducing cholesterol influx in  
21 the arterial wall by accelerating removal from circulation of cholesterol-rich TGRL  
22 remnants  
23
  - 24 ○ The reverse remnant cholesterol transport (RRT) hypothesis explains the U-shape  
25 relationship between plasma HDL-C levels and cardiovascular disease by impaired  
26 transfer of cholesterol to HDL from TGRL upon their lipolysis by LPL in subjects with  
27 both low and extremely high HDL-C. Plasma concentration of HDL-C can be regarded  
28 as an imperfect static measure of remnant cholesterol removal through this dynamic  
29 pathway, which is only clinically relevant at low HDL-C levels. HDL capacity to  
30 acquire free cholesterol upon TGRL lipolysis by LPL in vitro may represent a superior  
31 biomarker of cardiovascular risk as compared to plasma HDL-C  
32
  - 33 ○ HDL-C-raising can be cardioprotective when it accelerates removal from circulation of  
34 remnant cholesterol. Rather than enhancing cholesterol efflux from macrophages as

1 proposed by the reverse cholesterol transport (RCT) model, the RRT hypothesis  
2 proposes to focus at diminishing cholesterol influx in the arterial wall from remnant  
3 lipoproteins. Such concept can be considered preventive, in contrast to the curative  
4 approach of the enhanced RCT  
5

## 1 Text Box 1

### 4 The RRT hypothesis

5 Reverse remnant-cholesterol transport (RRT) hypothesis explains the relationship between  
6 plasma HDL-C levels and cardiovascular disease by impaired transfer of free cholesterol to  
7 HDL from surface remnants of TGRL upon their lipolysis by LPL with subsequent transport  
8 of remnant-derived cholesterol to the liver.

9 This pathway originates in the intestine with the secretion of apoA-I and cholesterol in  
10 chylomicrons followed by their transport to plasma via lymph. According to this concept,  
11 plasma concentrations of HDL-C represent an imperfect static measure of cholesterol flux  
12 through this dynamic pathway.

### 13 Evidence supporting the hypothesis

#### 15 Low HDL-C

16 Transfer of free cholesterol to HDL from TGRL upon lipolysis by LPL is decreased (-45% vs  
17 controls) in low HDL-C patients with **acute myocardial infarction** (AMI) [51]. This finding  
18 may reflect impaired removal of remnant cholesterol from TGRL during lipolysis in the  
19 postprandial phase. Indeed, postprandial response to fat load is abnormally elevated in  
20 survivors of AMI who display elevated postprandial triglycerides relative to controls [55].  
21 Furthermore, postprandial response of AMI patients to exogenous fat is characterised by  
22 decreased HDL-C, consistent with abnormal free cholesterol transfer [95]. In addition,  
23 postprandial increases in HDL free cholesterol and phospholipid are diminished in CHD  
24 patients relative to controls upon fat load [96].

25 Patients with **LPL deficiency** display low HDL-C, in addition to severe hypertriglyceridemia  
26 [97]. Furthermore, circulating triglyceride concentrations are highly elevated and HDL-C is  
27 strongly decreased in atherosclerotic LPL -/- mice [98]. Reductions in HDL-C are also  
28 observed upon infusions of anti-LPL antibodies in experimental animals [99].

29 Postprandial triglyceride response is markedly exaggerated in low HDL-C subjects with  
30 **apoA-I deficiency** caused by an autosomal apo A-I Q[-2]X mutation who feature premature  
31 CHD [100]. Furthermore, postprandial accumulation in murine aortic tissue of [<sup>3</sup>H]-  
32 cholesterol is highly elevated in apoA-I knock-out mice [51]. In parallel, the capacity of

1 murine HDL to acquire free cholesterol upon TGRL lipolysis by LPL is reduced and  
2 negatively correlated with the aortic accumulation of [<sup>3</sup>H]-cholesterol [51].  
3 Plasma triglyceride levels are elevated in homozygous ATB-binding cassette transporter A1  
4 (**ABCA1**) **deficiency** [101]. Mechanism underlying the hypertriglyceridemia may involve  
5 delayed clearance of TGRL components through HDL. Indeed, ABCA1 may function to  
6 ensure HDL maturation and maintenance of plasma HDL pool required for efficient  
7 acquirement of surface remnants from TGRL [102].

#### 8 Extremely high HDL-C

10 The transfer of free cholesterol to HDL upon TGRL lipolysis is reduced in subjects with  
11 extremely high HDL-C levels of >100 mg/dl relative to normolipidemic controls but  
12 unchanged in subjects with high HDL-C of 70 to 100 mg/dl [51]. Consistent with the latter,  
13 the free cholesterol transfer is not compromised in high HDL-C apoA-I transgenic mice,  
14 potentially reflecting low CETP and LCAT activities in mice [51].

1 **Text Box 2**

2  
3 **Determinants of impaired free cholesterol transfer to HDL from TGRL upon lipolysis**

4  
5 Levels of acceptor HDL particles

6 Dose-dependences of lipolytic free cholesterol transfer to HDL reveal direct relationships  
7 with HDL concentrations at low-to-normal concentrations [51], most likely reflecting the  
8 presence in the assay of increasing amounts of acceptor HDL particles. As a corollary,  
9 decreases in the free cholesterol transfer observed in low HDL-C patients with AMI and Type  
10 2 diabetes may straightforwardly reflect low concentrations of the HDL acceptors [51].  
11 Mechanistically, such deficiency can limit the amount of surface lipids which can be acquired  
12 by HDL.

13  
14 Profile of acceptor HDL particles

15 HDL particles are highly heterogeneous [103, 104]. Small, dense, lipid-poor and protein-rich  
16 HDLs are potent in their biological activities, including the capacity to acquire free  
17 cholesterol upon TGRL lipolysis by LPL [51]. Extremely high HDL-C states feature elevated  
18 levels of large, lipid-rich HDL and reduced concentrations of small, lipid-poor HDL particles  
19 [105, 106]. The superior capacity of small vs. large HDL to acquire free cholesterol upon  
20 TGRL lipolysis may therefore contribute to reduced free cholesterol transfer to HDL observed  
21 in subjects with extremely high HDL-C levels [51].

22  
23 Lipid composition of HDL

24 HDL particles enriched of free cholesterol acquire less free cholesterol as compared to those  
25 depleted of this lipid [107]. Both human subjects and mice displaying high HDL-C levels,  
26 such as those with SR-BI deficiency, possess enlarged, free cholesterol-enriched HDL [29,  
27 108]. HDL enrichment in free cholesterol may thereby contribute to defective free cholesterol  
28 removal from TGRL upon lipolysis in subjects with extremely high HDL-C [51]. In contrast,  
29 low content of free cholesterol [104] may contribute to the potent capacity of small, dense  
30 HDL3 to acquire free cholesterol from lipolysed TGRL [51].

31  
32 Lipid transfer proteins and enzymes

1 Both CETP and LCAT play inhibitory roles towards cholesterol accumulation to HDL upon  
2 lipolysis, acting along the same pathway of free cholesterol esterification and removal from  
3 HDL in a form of cholesteryl esters [51]. Given a rate-limiting role of LCAT for this process  
4 [27], such cholesteryl ester transfer from HDL to TGRL might be negligibly low at low  
5 concentrations of LCAT (and low concentrations of HDL) but might greatly increase at high  
6 HDL concentrations, decreasing net cholesterol accumulation in HDL [51].  
7  
8



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2

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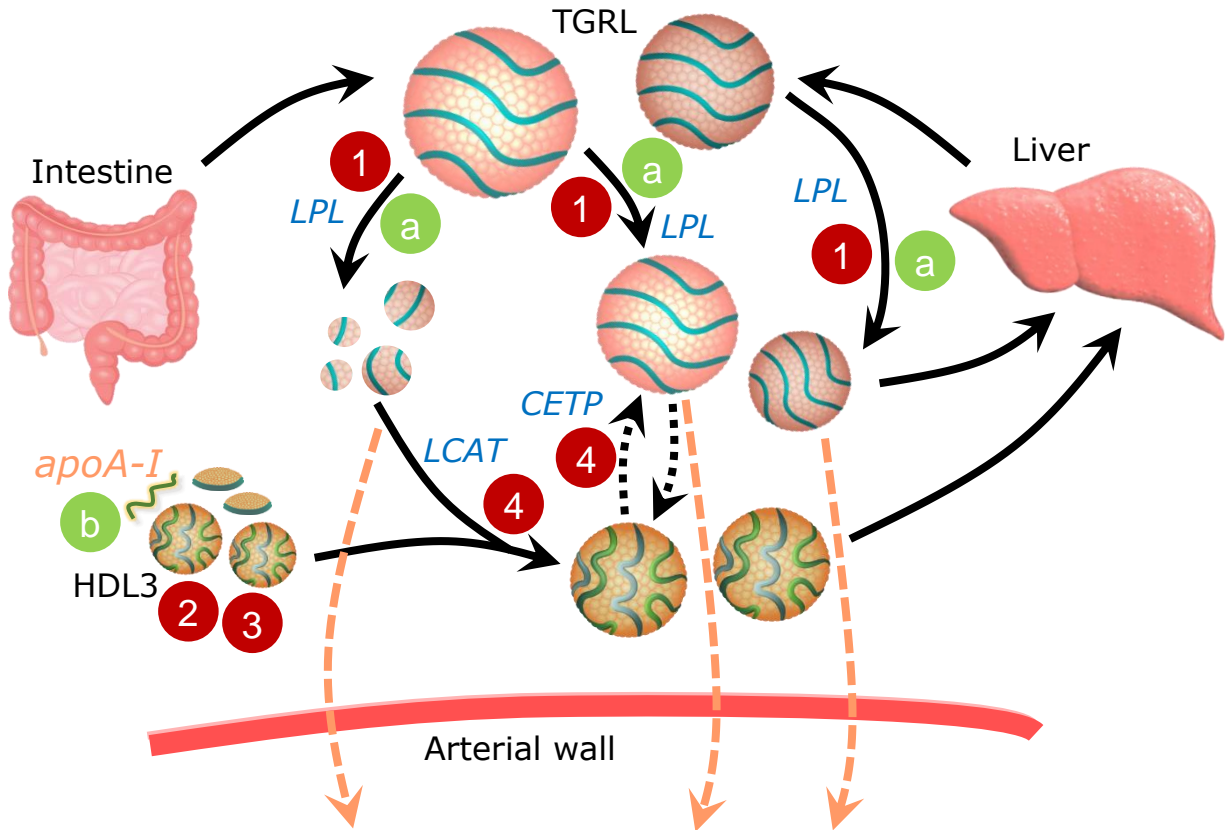


Figure 2