

Skin test can help assess heart risks

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CALGARY --Skin sterol tests are being touted as a new way for doctors to assess a patient's risk factor for coronary artery disease, according to research released at the Canadian Cardiovascular Congress in Calgary.

The accumulation of sterol in the skin tissues, specifically skin-tissue cholesterol, is measured non-invasively by the simple drop of a liquid on an individual's hand.

"Our findings confirm previous clinical evidence that skin sterol provides new information about heart-disease risk independent of blood cholesterol and other traditional risk factors," said cardiologist Dr. Milan Gupta, of McMaster University, in Hamilton.

Gupta said cholesterol gets in the skin in two ways: Skin cells produce cholesterol, and that cholesterol can be absorbed into the skin from deeper tissues.

To conduct the test, a liquid solution is placed in the palm of an individual's hand for about 30 seconds. It binds to the cholesterol in the skin and causes the indicator to change colour. The strength of the colour is associated with how much skin cholesterol is present. A machine measures that level.

"This is not meant to replace blood work, absolutely not," said Gupta. "It may be an important addition to our ability to [rank people in terms of their risk]."

Skin sterol was evaluated in 300 patients with proven coronary artery disease, 90 per cent of whom were taking statins to lower their elevated cholesterol levels.