

# Skin tests a useful diagnostic tool

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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 Dr. Milan Gupta, assistant clinical professor, Department of Medicine, McMaster University, in Hamilton, Ont., and cardiologist, Division of Cardiology, William Osler Health Centre, in Brampton, Ont.

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," 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.

Gupta said the study's key findings are: skin sterol appears to provide new information about coronary artery risk; skin sterol levels were elevated in high-risk subjects, demonstrating a positive correlation to angina and diabetes when adjusted for age and race; serum or blood markers were not positively correlated with prior stroke, angina or diabetes; and skin sterol values were higher in Caucasians than in non-Caucasians.