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Carotid ultrasound useful for atypical patients with cardiac symptoms

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By: Reuters Health

NEW YORK (Reuters Health), May 9 - Ultrasound of the carotid arteries has strong prognostic significance in patients symptomatic for heart disease, but who lack the typical risk factors, according to study findings reported today at the American Heart Association's 7th Scientific Forum on Quality of Care and Outcomes Research in Washington, DC.



Dr. Kwame O. Akosah and colleagues at Gunderson Lutheran Health System in La Crosse, Wisconsin, performed fasting lipid analysis and carotid ultrasound on 246 men and women who presented to their clinic for cardiac evaluation. Mean age was 55 years for the men and 65 years for the women. Out of the 246 patients, 149 had noncoronary atherosclerosis. Eighty percent were at low risk of coronary events, according to Framingham risk scores.

Dr. Akosah said carotid ultrasound imaging had strong prognostic significance for future coronary events. Over nearly three years of follow-up, 11 patients had 13 "hard" events, including death, MI and stroke. Thirty-six patients had 50 heart-related events of any kind, including the need of revascularization and new onset heart failure.

Overall, 18% had positive carotid ultrasound results and 9% had negative findings. After 32 months of follow-up, the subjects with negative results "had a very, very, very low chance of a heart attack," Dr. Akosah told Reuters Health. Patients with positive results were then treated according to treatment guidelines for coronary heart disease.

"Carotid ultrasound is appropriate in three groups of patients, Dr. Akosah said. "It's for the worried well, who just want to make sure they are OK and who are willing to pay for the test. It is also for the patient that the physician suspects has heart disease, but doesn't meet the risk profile." The third group is the patient who has had a heart attack but doesn't have the normal characteristics of a high-risk individual.

"About half of patients with heart attacks lack the typical risk factors, especially in patients who are somewhat younger or middle-aged." Dr. Akosah noted.

Carotid ultrasound is appropriate for patients without risk factors but who have a family history of heart disease, the Wisconsin researcher said.

"We have not done any cost analysis, but this is a very inexpensive test, it's in almost every doctor's office, it carries no risk, such as radiation, and it is noninvasive," Dr. Akosah commented.

Carotid ultrasound may well become a part of screening. "We need to see how this applies in a wider population, but the time is coming when we should embrace it," Dr. Akosah predicted. "One problem is that insurance companies rarely pay for screening...but this could decrease the cost of healthcare in the long run."

By Martha Kerr

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