

News

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****Nutrition researcher awarded NIH funding
to study cholesterol in post-menopausal women

Dallas--In the wake of recent Congressional accusations that medical research favors men's health concerns over women's, a researcher at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas is embarking on a study that focuses exclusively on post-menopausal women and the most effective means of lowering their blood cholesterol levels.

Dr. Margo Denke, assistant professor of internal medicine and a researcher in the Center for Human Nutrition, has been awarded a \$250,000 Clinical Investigator Award by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, part of the National Institutes of Health, to study hypercholesterolemia in post-menopausal women. Only 43 percent of the researchers who apply for the award receive NIH support.

The clinical trial, involving about 50 women over the age of 50 with high cholesterol, will last approximately one year and will evaluate the effectiveness of diet, hormone replacement therapy and medication in lowering cholesterol levels.

"The award is basically a show of support from the NIH," said Denke, who will receive \$50,000 annually for five years. "Women do not usually develop high blood cholesterol until after menopause. Then there is an abrupt increase in cholesterol levels. We're postulating

(More)

that blood cholesterol, particularly low-density lipoproteins, or LDL (the "bad" cholesterol), is related to the estrogen status of women.

"One of the things we'll be testing is the effect of hormone replacement therapy on blood lipids, or fats. The results of the study may further strengthen the case for hormone replacement therapy in post-menopausal women."

The study consists of four treatment phases. During the first month, participants will undergo a diet "stress test" by eating a high-fat diet under controlled conditions. The purpose of the diet is to raise blood cholesterol levels as much as safely possible.

The second phase will evaluate the effectiveness of a low-fat, low-cholesterol diet. Participants will follow the American Heart Association's Step One Diet, which restricts total fat intake to 30 percent of total calories and limits dietary cholesterol to 300 milligrams per day. The Step One Diet is recommended by the National Cholesterol Education Committee as nutritionally adequate and effective in lowering blood cholesterol.

"Much of the information concerning this diet, however, comes from studies of men," Denke said. "We want to study the effect of this diet in women. It may prove true that women may not be as diet-sensitive as men; their cholesterol levels may not go up as much as men's do from eating a diet high in saturated fat."

The Step One Diet will continue through the third phase of the treatment and a daily dose of estrogen and progesterone will be administered for three of the six months. A look-alike placebo will be given for the other three months.

The final phase of the program tests the effect of diet, hormone replacement and a low-dose, non-absorbable sand-like medication on cholesterol levels.

Denke currently has recruited only one-third of the women needed for the study. She is specifically looking for women with a total blood cholesterol level of more than 240 milligrams or an LDL level greater than 130 milligrams. Anyone who would like to be considered for the study can have her cholesterol level checked at no charge. Contact Denke or her physician's assistant, Ramona Leach, at 214-688-2898.

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Note: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.