

Cholesterol Screening Coverage Under Medicare

AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION POSITION

The American Heart Association strongly believes testing seniors for high lipid levels will drastically reduce the number of cardiovascular disease and stroke deaths each year and will greatly reduce the number of individuals disabled by these conditions.

With this in mind, the Association is leading the charge to pass HR 3278 and S. 1761 -- *The Medicare Cholesterol Screening Coverage Act of 2001*. Representatives Dave Camp (R-MI) and William Jefferson (D-LA) recently introduced this important bill in the House of Representatives. While U.S. Senators Byron Dorgan (D-ND), Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-CO) and Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) introduced the companion bill in the United States Senate. This legislation will guarantee Medicare coverage of preventive screenings for cholesterol and other lipid levels.

BACKGROUND

In May of 2001, two panels of independent experts at the National Institutes of Health and at the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality agreed -- it is never too late in life to substantially lower your risk of heart attack by aggressively lowering your blood cholesterol levels. Previously, these agencies had established upper age limits within their cholesterol screening guidelines. With nearly three quarters of Medicare eligible seniors suffering from either coronary heart disease (CHD) or hardening of the arteries, we must all stand up and take notice of these new guidelines.

Currently, Medicare beneficiaries are only covered for cholesterol screening tests if they suffer from known illnesses such as heart disease, stroke, diabetes or other disorders associated with elevated cholesterol levels. In many cases, seniors eligible for these tests are already victims of a condition cholesterol screening might have caught and prevented. By adding cholesterol screening as a covered benefit for ALL seniors enrolled in the Medicare program, Congress will enable Medicare beneficiaries to learn of problems in advance of a disabling or deadly event.

FACTS/STATISTICS

- Currently Medicare will not screen for elevated lipid levels *unless a patient has a cardiovascular disease diagnosis*, yet initial cardiovascular events are often fatal.
- Americans over the age of 65 have the highest rate of CHD in the nation and approximately 4 out of 5 people who die from CHD are aged 65 and older.
- Nearly two-thirds to three-quarters of seniors in this age group have either CHD or hardening of their arteries.

Seniors who are aware of their high cholesterol levels can begin a preventative course of treatment to reduce their risk of a heart attack or stroke.

