

Chewing the fat: new cholesterol screening guidelines for all kids

✖ I have a confession to make. Two of my kids still have not had their blood cholesterol checked. You see, according to the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (NHLBI), kids with risk factors for heart disease (in my children's case, a grandfather who had an early heart attack) should have their cholesterol level checked. But I'll be getting my kids to the lab soon. New research shows that although heart attacks and strokes are rarely seen until adulthood, atherosclerosis (cholesterol plugs) in blood vessels, which is a precursor for heart disease, can be seen as early as during fetal growth. The concern is so great for heart health that guidelines were recently revised: EVERYONE, regardless of risk factors, should be screened twice during childhood.

For those WITHOUT risk factors, your child's doctor can order NON-fasting total and high-density lipoprotein-HDL (aka "total cholesterol" and "good cholesterol") levels for initial screening. Routine screening should occur sometime between 9-11 years and again between 17-21 years.

For kids WITH heart disease risk factors like mine, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a nine to twelve hour fasting "lipid panel." Lipid panels usually measure low density lipoprotein (LDL) "bad cholesterol" and triglycerides in addition to total and HDL cholesterol. For kids with risk factors, screening should occur when the risks are discovered.

Pediatricians start asking for a family history of risk factors by three years old. Risk factors include: a parent, grandparent, aunt/uncle, or sibling with a heart attack or evidence of heart blood vessel damage less than 55 years in males or less than 65 years in females, or a parent with high cholesterol or triglycerides. Other risk factors for your child include having medical conditions such as diabetes, high blood pressure, obesity (Body Mass Index/BMI $\geq$ 95th percentile) and smoking cigarettes.

Ask your child's doctor for a full list of qualifying conditions.

The easiest way to time a "fasting" blood draw is to give your child dinner at his regular time, send him off to bed, and go to the lab first thing in the morning. Bring a snack with you so you can feed your child immediately after his blood is taken.

Because drinking water will not affect the lab results, have your child drink plenty of water before-hand and throw a sweater on him. The extra fluid will plump up the veins and the warmth from the sweater will dilate blood vessels, making it easier for the lab technician to draw blood.

Worried about calming down your kids' nerves before a blood draw? Use techniques discussed in How to take the sting out of injectible vaccines.

For the full NHLBI report check out http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/cvd_ped/index.htm . For guideline analysis look at this link from the American Academy of Pediatrics.

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