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Cholesterol & Statins Excellent Treatment Underused

A very common problem I encounter every day in my clinical practice is managing elevated cholesterol levels for my patients. This is vitally important because elevated cholesterol levels are a major risk factor for atherosclerosis and coronary artery disease which leads to stroke and heart attack.

Cholesterol comes from two sources, your body and food. The majority, about 75%, is produced in your liver. The remainder comes from food that you eat. The first step in controlling your cholesterol is to know your level of cholesterol. Cholesterol levels should be measured at least once every 5 years for everyone over the age of 20. I actually check this number more frequently for my patients with a lipoprotein profile obtained during a routine physical examination. This test measures LDL (bad cholesterol), HDL (good cholesterol), and Triglycerides (fats carried in the blood from food eaten). The results come in the form of numbers.

LDL - the lower this number, the better for your health. This is the cholesterol that builds up on the walls of your arteries and increases the chance of heart attack. 100 or less is optimal. For people that already have heart disease 70 is the target number. Anything above 130 is considered too high.

HDL - the higher this number, the better for your health. This is because HDL "protects" against heart disease by taking the "bad" cholesterol out of

your blood. 60 or above is optimal. Less than 40 for men or 50 for women is low and a risk factor for heart disease.

Triglycerides - High triglyceride levels have been linked to coronary artery disease in some people. Try and keep this number below 150.

Once cholesterol levels have been determined, treatment can be recommended if needed. Generally, everyone benefits from diet and exercise. The chief recommendation here is to limit saturated fats(red and processed meats, whole dairy products, etc.) and attempt to keep your weight at healthy levels by exercising at least 3-4 times/week. Many people for many reasons are either unable to successfully incorporate these recommendations consistently, or even with their best efforts still have cholesterol levels that remain in an unhealthy range. Fortunately, there are medications available that are extremely effective in controlling cholesterol and have been scientifically proven to decrease heart attacks and death from all causes. These medications are known as “Statins”. The statins currently available in the U.S. include Atorvastatin (Lipitor), Fluvastatin (Lescol), Lovastatin (Mevacor), Pravastatin(Pravachol), Rosuvastatin (Crestor), and Simvastatin (Zocor). These medications work in the liver to prevent the formation of cholesterol. They are best at lowering LDL levels, but can also help at raising HDL levels and lower triglycerides. There may even be additional benefits from using Statins. Evidence suggests they have anti-inflammatory properties which may stabilize the lining of blood vessels. This could have far reaching effects on the brain and heart, as well as blood vessels and organs throughout the body. Recent studies show they can reduce formation of dangerous blood clots.

I believe that these medications are some of the most valuable, effective, and safe medications available. I also believe that they are underused. One reason for this may be that patients have heard of reports of liver damage occurring in people on statins. These problems are quite rare and can be detected with routine blood tests. They are NOT a valid reason for people to be fearful and refuse treatment with these valuable medications. For the

few people who cannot tolerate statins because of persistent liver abnormalities or muscle discomfort, other medications are available.

If you have elevated cholesterol, other risk factors for heart disease, or have questions about Statins, please discuss them with your doctor. Don't let exaggerated fears of side effects prevent you from receiving beneficial treatment. It could be a deadly mistake.

For more information, please visit <http://www.safecare.com>.

Richard J. Wilbur, M.D. is Board Certified in Internal Medicine.

Office Hours:

Mondays 9:00 AM - 4:30 PM,

Tuesdays 9:00 AM - 4:30 PM

Wednesdays 9:00 AM - 7:30 PM

Thursdays 9:00 AM - 12:15 PM

Fridays 9:00 AM - 4:30 PM

Alternate Saturdays 9:00 AM - 1:00 PM

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