



Cholesterol Lowering Statin Drug Increases Cancer Risk

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Results from a new meta-analysis just released is sparking a lot of interest and controversy. The analysis was originally designed to look at the relationship between statin drugs and liver and muscle toxicity from over 41,000 patient records and 23 drug trials. What they found is a significant correlation between lower LDL-cholesterol levels and newly diagnosed cases of cancer. The researches also observed that rates for liver toxicity rose with increased statin dosing.

These findings should be taken seriously since more than 40 million Americans take statin drugs daily. Many of us function under the misconception that the lower the cholesterol, the better. But this is not necessarily true. Cholesterol is involved in many important functions in the body including the production of hormones, growth and development of the brain and nervous system, precursor to vitamin D in the skin, component of bile acids used in digestion, and growth and repair of tissues. Very low cholesterol levels can contribute to depression, anxiety, aggressive behavior, and malnutrition.

The National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) considers LDL to be the primary target of cholesterol-lowering therapy as elevated levels are seen as a risk factor for coronary heart disease. LDL levels, often called "bad" cholesterol, are part of standard cholesterol panels along with total cholesterol, triglycerides, and HDL ("good" cholesterol) levels. However, most labs determine LDL using the Friedewald formula, which is a calculated value and therefore not as precise or accurate as a direct measurement. In 2004 the National Institute of Health lowered the guidelines for LDL from 130 to 100 and in higher risk patients to as low as 70. This means an increased use of cholesterol-lowering medications based on the lowered calculated numbers rather than direct measurement. In fact, cholesterol medications have been the top-selling drugs the past several years.

There are newer methods of cholesterol testing available that determine direct LDL levels as well as the number and size of lipoproteins. These particles transport cholesterol in the blood and can help determine risk factors for cardiovascular disease beyond the standard cholesterol testing. There are several labs that offer this type of testing, including Spectracell and LipoScience. Since approximately 50% of people who have had a heart attack had cholesterol levels within "normal" range, the traditional method of measuring cholesterol alone may not be providing a complete picture.

Cholesterol profiles can be improved in many people through dietary changes, weight loss, and regular exercise. In addition, there are a number of effective non-drug therapies including fish oil, fiber, guggul, garlic, red yeast rice, niacin, and plant sterols. Naturopathic doctors can help determine which options may be most appropriate for you.

Article cited: Alsheikh-Ali A, MD, Maddukuri P, Han H, et al. Effect of the Magnitude of Lipid Lowering on Risk of Elevated Liver Enzymes, Rhabdomyolysis, and Cancer. *J Am Coll Cardiol*. 2007; 50:409-418.