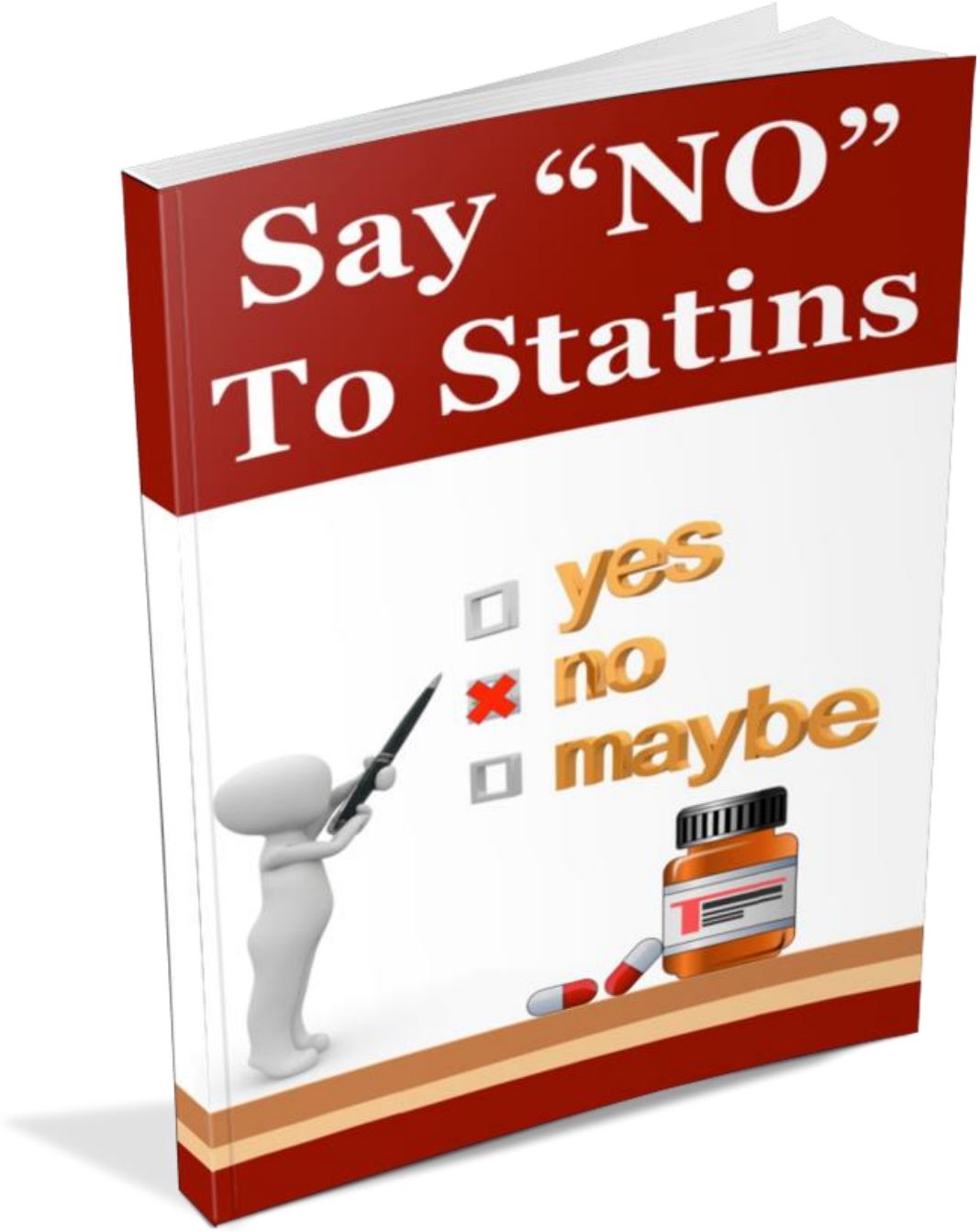

SAY NO TO STATINS

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Introduction

Statins are the most commonly prescribed class of drugs in the world, with the #1 seller the cholesterol-lowering drug Lipitor (atorvastatin). They are commonly prescribed under the assumption that they can help protect heart health and lower the risk of heart attack. However, as with all medicines, they carry a risk of side effects.

Statins were first discovered in the 1980s, and Lipitor was the first to win U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approval in 1987. The original protocol was to only prescribe the drug if the patient had made significant lifestyle changes such as diet but was still unable to get their cholesterol down to heart healthy levels. However, Lipitor soon became a cash cow that was far too easy to milk. It became part of a 'one pill fits all approach' for anyone who had high cholesterol.

Other statins soon emerged and jockeyed for market share, but as more and more post-approval studies for statins emerged, so too did a growing number of side effects and risks that patients had suffered as a result of taking the medication.

As with all drugs, both prescription and over the counter, it is always a case of balancing risk on the one hand with benefits on the other. In the case of many medications, however, the patient is not being give the full facts needed to make intelligent decisions and what is termed informed consent.

In this guide, you will discover what cholesterol is, how statins lower blood serum cholesterol, and what major risks and side effects have been reported in relation to statins. You will also discover easy, natural ways to reduce dietary cholesterol so you can decide for yourself whether statins are worth the risk or whether you can go the all-natural route.

Let's start with what cholesterol is and why it can become a health problem.

What Is Cholesterol?

We've all heard the word cholesterol. But what is it, and why is it bad for your health? Cholesterol is actually a natural substance that we all produce in our bodies. It is wax-like fat that helps the essential parts of our cells remain inside their walls while also allowing nutrients and chemicals to pass in either direction through the permeable membrane. Everyone produces cholesterol in their liver, but some of us make more than others.

Diet also plays a key part in how much blood serum cholesterol a person has when the doctor checks their cholesterol levels through a blood test. We digest the food we eat with the help of bile from the liver, which helps break down the food into various components, including cholesterol. The cholesterol is then sent back to the liver. Anything the body does not use becomes a waste product which is excreted when we go to the bathroom.

There are 4 main numbers looked at with regard to cholesterol:

* Total cholesterol
* LDL cholesterol-think L for Lousy
* HDL cholesterol-think H for Helpful
* Triglycerides

Total cholesterol is HDL plus LDL.

The optimal levels for each of these components is:

Total
Less than 200

LDL-the lower the better
Less than 100

HDL-the higher the better
60 or above

Triglycerides

150 or below

So what are these different measurements?

Total cholesterol is made up of LDL and HDL.

LDL, Low Density Lipoprotein (fat protein), cholesterol is made up of small particles that are dangerous because they can stick to the walls of blood vessels that have been damaged, or that are suffering from inflammation. Stress, medications, and certain conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, can all trigger inflammation. One other component of LDL is VLDL, Very Low Density, which is even sticker than LDL because the molecules are so small.

If the LDL sticks, it can block arteries, such as coronary arteries that supply the heart with blood to keep it healthy. If the supply is reduced or blocked, it can lead to a heart attack. Sometimes a clump of LDL can break off from the blood vessel walls and form a clot. Clots can travel throughout the body and get lodged in a narrowed blood vessel clogged with LDL cholesterol, commonly referred to as arterial plaque.

If the clot goes to the heart, it can cause heart attack. If it goes to the brain, it will cause a stroke. If it travels to one of the arteries that supplies blood to the legs, it can cause tissue death. If the circulation is not restored in all of these cases, tissue death and eventually actual death will occur.

HDL, High Density Lipoprotein, is known as helpful cholesterol because its large particles can help clear clogged blood vessels by removing arterial plaque.

Triglycerides
Triglycerides are another type of fat used to store excess energy from the food you eat, especially animal proteins and sugary foods high in carbohydrates. They are also associated with hardening of the arteries. If the calories are not used, they get stored as fat, leading to obesity, which can cause heart health issues.

Doctors often prescribe statins for people with high cholesterol in order to lower their total cholesterol and thus reduce their risk of a heart attack or stroke. However, most people taking statins are expected to take them for the rest of

their lives. In most cases, they are not given the option of trying to achieve normal cholesterol levels through diet, exercise, weight loss and other natural methods, they are just told to take statins.

Many people have heard of statins and probably even know people who are taking them, so if their doctor suggests a statin, they will rarely question the doctor's recommendation. However, it is crucial to understand all the medicines you ever take, why you are taking them, how long for, and what the potential side effects can be.

For some patients, the side effects of statins are so severe it will not be worth it for them to take them. For others, they will need to balance the benefits with the risks, some of which may be long-term.

Let's look in the next chapter at some of the most common side effects of statin drugs.

What Are Statins?

Statins is the name given to a class of drugs used to lower cholesterol. Atorvastatin (Lipitor) is the most well-known and is the #1 prescribed drug in the world, but there are several other statins you've probably heard of, including
Rovustatin (Crestor)
Simvastatin (Zocor)
Fluvastatin (Lescol)

Figure 1: Lipitor, the #1 prescribed drug in the world

The medical name for statins is HMG-CoA reductase inhibitors, that is, drugs which inhibit the action of that particular enzyme in the liver. The theory is that if this enzyme is inhibited, the body will stop producing so much cholesterol itself, and therefore start to use the cholesterol in the food we eat instead.

If dietary cholesterol is used, it clears the bad LDL cholesterol from the bloodstream so it will not have the chance to stick in an artery to start to form arterial plaque, which leads to hardening of the arteries.

The trouble with this theory is that the liver is a very sensitive organ with a range of functions. Inhibiting that enzyme has been linked to issues with muscle formation and health, and with liver damage, including damage to the part of the liver that produces insulin, with the potential to cause Type 2 diabetes.

But the liver is not the only area of the body affected by the side effects of statins. Let's look in the next chapter at other risks people are exposed to if they take statins.

Common Side Effects And Risks When Taking Statins

There are a range of known side effects connected with taking statins. These include:

- Muscle pain and damage
- Liver damage
- Kidney damage
- Digestive disorders
- Skin issues
- Type 2 diabetes
- Neurological damage, including Alzheimer's
- Heart health issues

Let's look at each of these in turn below.

Muscle pain and damage

The most common side effect of statin drugs is muscle pain and weakness. The pain ranges from mild to so severe that it is difficult to manage your Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) pain can be a mild discomfort, or it can be severe enough to make your daily activities difficult.

In some cases, statins can cause life-threatening muscle damage called rhabdomyolysis (RAB-dough-my-ALL-eye-sis), which can result in severe muscle pain, liver damage, kidney failure and death. Rhabdomyolysis can occur when you

take statins in combination with certain other drugs, or if you are taking a high dose of statins.

At the European Society of Cardiology Congress in 2015 held in London, Dr. Eric Bruckert gave some helpful guidelines as to how to manage muscle pain in people taking statins, which includes distinguishing between pain due to statins and to other causes. Above all, he recommends an individualized approach for anyone who decides they wish to try statins. Two of his main points are:

1-Assess the risk/benefit ratio—are the symptoms intolerable, and is statin therapy necessary?

2-Consider the optimal statin and dose, combination therapy (such as using other cholesterol lowering drugs available), or alternative strategies [for lowering cholesterol], such as through natural means.

If they really can't get their cholesterol low enough through natural means, he suggests fluvastatin (Lescol) because it has the least amount of reported side effects including muscle pain.

Figure 2: A human liver

Liver damage

Statins operate to try to prevent your body from absorbing cholesterol from food, but it doing so, the drug can trigger your liver to start producing more enzymes, which can lead to liver damage over time. Certain other medicines can also trigger liver damage, so if you are taking a statin, you should have regular blood tests to check that your liver enzymes are in the normal range.

The liver helps filter some toxins out of the body. If you experience pain in your upper abdomen, unusual tiredness, yellowing skin or the whites of your eyes (jaundice) or dark-colored urine, see your doctor.

Kidney damage
A study released in Spring 2015 has linked high-dose statins to acute (sudden) kidney disease within 120 days of starting a statin, and an increased risk for up to 2 years after starting it.

Your kidneys also perform very important filtering functions to get rid of waste products in the body, so you can't live without your kidneys. Once they are damaged, their function will start to decline, and eventually the person will need dialysis (the use of a machine to clear the toxins) and a kidney transplant if the person is eligible to be put on the list.

Digestive problems
People taking statins have reported a range of unpleasant gastric side effects, including:

- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Gassiness
- Diarrhea and
- Constipation

Some studies suggest that statins should be taken with food in the evenings to cut down on these side effects.

Skin issues
Some people have reported a rash while taking statins. Others experience what is termed flushing, getting red in the face and feeling warm. Flushing can often happen in relation to other heart medications. Both of these symptoms disappear if the medicine is stopped.

Type 2 diabetes
Statins appear to increase blood sugar, that is, the A1C blood glucose readings when you are given a blood test. A recent study from Finland estimated those on statins are at 50% higher risk of developing Type 2 diabetes than those who are not taking statins.

Type 2 diabetes carries many risks to heart, circulation, vision, kidney health and more. Blood glucose, like liver enzymes, should be monitored regularly by anyone taking a statin. With so many people developing diabetes in the US in the last 20 years, it is a good idea to be checked regularly even if not on a statin, and to avoid sugary drinks and foods high in carbohydrates.

Neurological side effects

The FDA periodically changes drug labels when serious side effects have been reported and substantiated. Statin labels indicate that some people develop memory loss or confusion while taking statins. These side effects usually reverse once you stop taking the medication. Some studies have linked statins to Alzheimer's, while others assert that it can help boost brain function.

Heart health issues

It may seem strange to include this considering statins are supposed to boost heart health, but the fact is that it affects a number of important vitamin and mineral levels needed for heart health.

It stops Vitamin K2 from protecting your arteries from hardening. It depletes selenium, which means more inflammation and also more chance for the arteries to harden. It also affects coenzyme Q10 (CoQ10), which helps with heart health and also muscle health.

Other health issues

Another issue of concern is damage to the mitochondria of your cells, which are the energy centers for healthy cell function. Statins affect the heart muscle mitochondria in particular, causing poor cell signaling and poor cell function, which could lead to heart failure.

Who is at risk?

Not everyone who takes a statin will have side effects, but some people may be at a greater risk than are others. The following may leave you more prone to serious side effects

- Taking multiple medications to lower your cholesterol
- Being a woman
- Having a smaller body frame
- Being age 65 or older
- Suffering from any kidney or liver conditions
- Having type 1 or 2 diabetes
- Drinking too much alcohol, that is, more than 2 drinks a day for men and 1 drink per day for women under 65, and more than 1 drink a day for all genders if over 65.

If you or a loved one have been taking statins and experiencing significant side effects, it might be time to discuss with your doctor a safe process of weaning you off them. If you haven't started taking them yet and your doctor wishes to prescribe them, ask them to hold off for 3 to 6 months while you try to get your cholesterol back down to optimal levels through natural means.

Let's look at some of the most effective natural means of lowering your cholesterol in the next chapter.

Easy Ways To Lower Dietary Cholesterol Naturally

Statins work by slowing your body's production of cholesterol. Your body produces all the cholesterol it needs by digesting food and producing new cells on its own. When this natural production is slowed, your body begins to draw the cholesterol it needs from the food you eat, lowering your total cholesterol. Therefore, the easiest way to lower cholesterol is to avoid foods that contain cholesterol.

Figure 3: A new eating lifestyle

The easiest way to do this is to avoid all animal-based foods. Plant-based ones do not contain cholesterol.

This is of course rather different from the usual American ‘meat and potatoes’ diet and fast food. The other extreme is the Okinawan diet, where the people on that small Japanese island eat a diet that is around 95% plant protein, with small amounts of fish, and the cornerstone of the diet is actually sweet potatoes, not rice as many might imagine.

A less drastic new eating lifestyle that is also heart healthy is the Mediterranean diet. The current obesity level in the US is 68%; in Italy it is only 9%. "How is this possible?" you might wonder, especially when Italian food is amongst the most delicious in the world. The secret is small portions of a range of fresh foods, such as fruits and vegetables, with olive oil and a glass of red wine, and only a small amount of protein at each meal.

Even though a quick check of a nutrition database would show that olive oil actually has more calories than butter, olive oil is considered a healthy fat because it contains no cholesterol and increases HDL or good cholesterol.

So-called healthy fast should still be eaten in moderation as part of a balanced diet, of course, but healthy fats and the 'good' cholesterol they provide are important because they can serve as the 'plumber' to keep the pipes of your arteries free from clogs caused by 'bad' cholesterol.
Add antioxidants

Antioxidants are a class of foods that reduce the wear and tear on the body that comes with aging, a process known as oxidation. Antioxidants you can easily add to your diet include blueberries, cherries and green tea.

Oatmeal
Oatmeal is full of fiber and helps lower cholesterol.

8 walnuts
As few as 8 walnuts a day has been shown to boost HDL and lower LDL. Add to your oatmeal for a filling breakfast.

1 brazil nut
The brazil nut is the richest source of natural selenium available. They are tasty and full of fiber. Cut one up to add to your oatmeal, or to a salad for some crunch. Note-do NOT eat too many, because too much selenium can have a toxic effect.

10 to 20 almonds
Add these to your salads or eat as a healthy snack. They have been shown to lower cholesterol by as much as 4% to 9%.

Avocados and their oil
They are healthy fruits rich in protein and healthy fats. Mash them up and use for guacamole, the base for a green smoothie, or as a substitute for mayonnaise in certain sandwiches. The oil can be used as salad dressing.

Green leafy vegetables
These are rich in nutrients, including Vitamin K for heart health. They also contain sodium, magnesium and potassium, collectively known as electrolytes, which help keep the heartbeat regular and need to be replenished after you have worked out or on hot days.

Omega-3 fatty acids
These are contained in fatty fish like salmon and tuna, and in fish oil supplements. Eating the fish will give you valuable protein and also offer a substitute for the meals you used to eat with red meat.

Soy
Tofu is a good alternative to meat as well, and to dairy. Soy milk, yogurt, cheese and ice cream are all low in saturated fat and full of phytochemicals and plant proteins.

Beans and legumes
These are also full of plant proteins, plus fiber to make you feel full. Kidney beans and pink beans have a nice, meaty texture and are ideal for homemade chili. Lentils and lima beans are 2 good example of legumes to try.

Exercise
More movement means more calories burned, which means fewer stored in the fat cells in your body. Plus, developing lean muscle through yoga or tai chi, for example, speeds up your metabolism to help you slim down.

Lower your body fat ratio
Body fat is not just ugly if you are in a bikini. It is also known to release a range of toxins that will actually prevent you from losing weight no matter how hard you try.

Reduce stress
Stress causes inflammation in the body, and inflammation damages blood vessels, allowing LDL to get a chance to stick to the walls of your arteries and harden them. Reduce your stress levels with meditation, yoga, and doing things you enjoy every day.

Lower blood pressure

Blood pressure will push at the artery walls as the heart beats. The higher the pressure, the more the arteries will harden and the greater the danger of a clot forming. The DASH diet, that is Dietary Approaches to Stopping Hypertension (the clinical name for high blood pressure) is a heart healthy diet that has been proven to lower blood pressure naturally and even help people lose weight.

Use one or all of these methods and see what a difference it can make to your overall health.

Conclusion

Statins may help those who produce so much cholesterol in their own bodies that they can't get their numbers low enough by natural means such as diet and exercise. For the rest of us, however, it is possible to increase our good HDL cholesterol and lower our bad LDL cholesterol. Eating a balanced diet rich in fruits and vegetables is the best way to lower your dietary cholesterol, to ward off heart disease and lead a longer, happier life. Say no to statins and yes to better self-care through the right eating lifestyle, moderate exercise, and effective stress relief techniques.

Resources

List of Current Statins on the Market
http://www.drugs.com/drug-class/hmg-coa-reductase-inhibitors.html

FDA statement on statin risks
http://www.fda.gov/forconsumers/consumerupdates/ucm293330.htm

Cholesterol 101 video
http://www.drugs.com/health/cholesterol/s

Consumer Reports Statin Comparisons 2014
https://www.consumerreports.org/health/resources/pdf/best-buy-drugs/StatinsUpdate-FINAL.pdf

Cholesterol: The Good, The Bad, and The Essential
http://www.drugs.com/health/cholesterol/anatomy-2046/#1/bodies-in-motion-cholesterol