

Cholesterol-lowering Statin Drugs Now linked to Memory Loss and Elevated Blood Sugar

James Meschino DC, MS, ROHP

As published by FDA MedWatch Safety Alerts in March 2012, the US Food and Drug Administration announced in two Drug Safety Communications that important changes are being made to the drug labels of a broad range of cholesterol-lowering statin drugs.

The safety information for the popular cholesterol-lowering drugs is tied to their effects on liver enzymes, memory, diabetes and muscle damage. (The drug label is the package insert that comes with a prescription medication.).

Liver, kidney and muscle damage were the original concerns that surfaced during the early years of statin drug use. More recently, we have seen that statin drugs also cause memory loss problems and elevated blood sugar problems in some patients. The latter is of concern in patients that have diabetes and high cholesterol, as the use of statin drugs may worsen the diabetic or pre-diabetic state. This, in turn, requires even higher doses of drugs to manage blood sugar complications. It becomes a vicious circle often with one drug causing or aggravating a different problem, that in turn, forces the writing of a prescription for yet another drug, and so on.

Risk - The new labels include information about these potential side-effects of statins:

- cognitive effects—such as memory loss or confusion—that are generally not serious and reversible
- increased blood sugar
- an increased risk for muscle injury under certain conditions when taking lovastatin

Other Recommendations Mentioned in the FDA Communication Include:

- Patients should contact their health care professional if they have any concerns about taking statins.
- Health care professionals should perform liver enzyme tests before initiating statin therapy in patients and then whenever clinically indicated.
- Health care professionals and patients are encouraged to report any side effects resulting from the use of these products to MedWatch.

Studies show that many patients can lower their cholesterol without statin drugs. The key strategies include eating less saturated fat, trans fats, fried foods and cholesterol-rich foods, as well as not over consuming refined or starchy carb foods. Also, stay at your ideal weight, perform endurance exercise at least 5 days a week, and eat foods that contain soluble fiber that lower cholesterol (beans, peas, oats, ground flaxseed, psyllium husk fiber etc). I recently saw a patient who reduced their total cholesterol from 7.2 mmol/L (276 mg/dL) to 4.8 mmol/L (184.6 mg/dL), using a combination supplement containing Gum Guggul (used extensively in India) and Artichoke Leaf Extract. This is remarkable success. She also did a bit more exercise and lost 5-10 pounds by improving her diet.

It's so unfortunate that MD's are not highly trained in the area of nutrition and lifestyle medicine and the evidence-based use of supplements. I remain concerned about the over prescribing of statin drugs in our society and the FDA report of March 2012 further substantiates suspicions about the negative health effects that may be in-store for so many people who have been prescribed statins.

There is no doubt that these drugs have their place, but they are prescribed in many cases where lifestyle modification could rectify the problem without risk of side effects.

Reference: <https://www.fda.gov/Drugs/DrugSafety/ucm293101.htm>