



RELAX ABOUT STATINS

Cholesterol-lowering drug's benefits outweigh possible risks, reports our expert



ONE OF MY heart patients asked me the other day if it's possible for her cholesterol level to get too low.

She was concerned after hearing about a recent study that suggested heart patients taking the popular statin drugs to reduce cholesterol levels might be at a higher risk for developing cancer. The study, which was conducted by researchers at Tufts University and published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, found that for every 1,000 patients treated, there was one more case of cancer in those with the lowest cholesterol levels compared with those with higher levels.

Studies such as this are important because they make doctors think through the potential risks vs. benefits of various therapies we prescribe. But before everyone flushes their cholesterol medicine down the toilet, let's review the study in a little greater detail.

The researchers conducted what is called a meta-analysis. This means that they didn't directly study the patients themselves; instead they reviewed data from many different studies they pooled together (23, in this case). One strength of a meta-analysis is that it increases the number of patients studied, but a weakness is that the data comes from many, sometimes varied, sources. This means that the research itself should be kept in perspective.

Interpreting studies such as this can be confusing for the average person. We all want to do what's right, and just when we think we've got a handle on things, information like this gives cause for pause. To help get a better idea of the risk, I spoke to one of the nation's

leading authorities on the subject.

Scott Grundy is the director of human nutrition at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas. He has spent his entire medical career studying the effects of cholesterol and cholesterol treatments. I asked Grundy for his thoughts on low cholesterol levels as they pertain to health.

SCARY STUDY? DR. TEDD CLEARS THE AIR.

What he had to say: "To date, there is no significant evidence that lowering cholesterol from high to low with either diet or medicine is dangerous. Even if there were to be some side effects (which have yet to be proven), the benefit for preventing heart disease far outweighs any adverse effect. Because of this, people being treated for high cholesterol should be assured that the known benefits far outweigh any theoretical adverse side effects."

I believe this is good advice. Although it's important not to ignore findings from new research showing potential risks from treatments, it's also important to sift through the information to see if other factors might explain the findings. For example, in this study it's possible that the increased cancer incidence came about because aggressive treatment with the statin drugs made the patients live longer.

As with any medicine, those taking statins to lower their cholesterol need to maintain follow-up with their doctor to be sure their treatment program is right for them. As for my heart patient, we discussed the risks and benefits of her medicine, and when she left, she took her new prescription with her.

TEDD MITCHELL, M.D., *president and medical director of Dallas' Cooper Clinic, writes HealthSmart every week.*

Diabetic? Cholesterol drugs may prevent foot damage

50% of diabetics have serious disorder that can lead to amputation

If you're diabetic and your feet or hands sting, tingle or lack sensation, the cause could be nerve damage, called peripheral sensory diabetic neuropathy.

About half of all diabetics have it, says the American Diabetes Association. The serious condition can lead to ulcers, infections and even amputations.

The good news: Research finds that two types of lipid-lowering drugs — statins and fibrates, both used to prevent cardiovascular disease — can reduce your risk of developing neuropathy. And if you already have the nerve damage, these medications might even slow its progress, says lead researcher Timothy Davis, M.D., Ph.D., professor of medicine at the University of Western Australia.

Other diabetic tips from the researcher:

- **See your doctor.** All diabetics should be checked at least annually for foot problems. If you have symptoms, let your doctor know right away. Early treatment can help avoid problems (such as amputation).

- **Check feet frequently.** Do this especially if you suspect problems or your circumstances change (i.e., new pair of shoes). Use your eyes and a mirror. Look for sores, cuts or skin breaks.

- **Take care of your feet.** Use lotion (but not between the toes), wear well-fitting socks and shoes, wash with warm water, and be sure to dry thoroughly. Get special shoes if needed. Medicare may cover if you have foot problems.

- **Work out wisely.** Some exercises strain the feet, especially when your sneakers are ill-fitting or tight. **W**

— Susan T. Lennon

