

NATURAL ALTERNATIVES TO STATINS

BY JACK CHALLEN, THE NUTRITION REPORTER



But the real story, which was missed by nearly all health reporters, was that the researchers distorted the drug's supposed benefits. The real story is that statins do far more harm than good—and safe and natural alternatives abound.

The JUPITER trial involved almost 18,000 subjects who took either Crestor or placebos daily for an average of two years. All of the subjects had *normal* levels of the “bad” LDL form of cholesterol, but high levels of C-reactive protein (CRP), an indicator of inflammation. Over the past 10 years, inflammation has been recognized as the underlying cause of coronary heart disease.

Crestor did reduce LDL and CRP levels, and the researchers reported what seemed like a striking reduction in the risk of heart attack or stroke—they concluded that the “relative risk” of a heart attack or stroke decreased by 50 percent.

But a close look at the study found the benefits to be less than impressive. “Relative risk” is based on a statistical calculation, but the real-world numbers found that only one person out of 120 actually benefited from the drug. That translated to less than a 1 percent benefit. Worse, during the two-year study, people taking Crestor were 25 percent more likely—again, in real-world numbers—to develop type-2 diabetes compared with those taking placebos. The

study did prove that statins lower CRP levels, thus reducing the risk of heart attack or stroke, but what it didn't mention is that there is an array of natural alternatives that do the same thing.

NATURAL WAYS TO REDUCE INFLAMMATION

High blood levels of CRP mean that your body is experiencing chronic inflammation, and your risk of developing heart disease, diabetes, Alzheimer's, cancer, and other diseases is higher than average. Your first step toward lowering CRP levels should

be to improve your eating habits. Specifically, the research shows that a high intake of sugars, refined carbohydrates, and junk oils (like trans-fats) is related to elevated CRP levels. So is smoking and being overweight. Conversely, diets high in fish, fruits, and vegetables can effectively lower CRP levels.

Many different supplements can also help reduce CRP levels. If you're concerned about inflammation, before you jump on the “statin bandwagon,” consider adding any of the following supplements to your routine.

Multivitamins I usually recommend a high-potency multivitamin as the foundation of any supplement program. This type of a supplement provides nutritional insurance that protects against deficiencies. Several human studies have found that multivitamin supplements can significantly reduce CRP levels. The benefit is likely related to how multivitamins bolster our internal nutritional biochemistry. A study at the Cooper Institute in Dallas found that multivitamins lowered CRP levels by 14 percent within six months.

Vitamin C This essential nutrient fights free radicals, and in the process helps curb inflammation. Vitamin C also plays important roles in immunity, enhancing normal immune function. This is important because inflammation is an immune system activity. Earlier this year, Gladys Block, PhD, of the University of California, Berkeley, published a study in which 396 men and women were given either 1,000 mg of vitamin C, 800 IU of vitamin E, or placebos daily for two months. The vitamin C led to a 25 percent decrease in CRP levels.

Vitamin E Vitamin E has been used successfully in the treatment of heart disease since the 1940s, and its benefits may be due in large part to its anti-inflammatory properties. Supplements of natural-source vitamin E can lower CRP levels by 30 to 50 percent, according to several studies. Vitamin E is also a mild blood-thinner, which likely contributes to its heart-healthy benefits. The vitamin's anti-inflammatory effect has also been corroborated in two studies of patients with rheumatoid arthritis, an

inflammatory disease. Vitamin E's anti-inflammatory benefits seem to take a couple of months to reach a noticeable level.

Niacin The niacin form of vitamin B3 has been used to improve lipid profiles since the 1950s. It can lower the "bad" low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol and increase the "good" high-density lipoprotein (HDL) form of cholesterol. A recent study of 54 patients found that niacin supplements for three months led to a 20 percent reduction in CRP levels. *Note:* The anti-inflammatory benefits of vitamin B3 are related to the niacin form of the vitamin, not the niacinamide form. However, niacin triggers the release of histamine, leading to a flushing sensation that lasts about one hour. Most people tolerate the flush and tingling very well, but others find it uncomfortable. The intensity of the flush decreases with regular intake of niacin.

Pycnogenol® Derived from the bark of French maritime pine trees, Pycnogenol is a complex of some 40 antioxidants. It has powerful anti-inflammatory effects when taking in amounts of at least 150 mg (50 mg, three times daily). In a study of patients with osteoarthritis, Pycnogenol supplements decreased CRP levels by an average of 72 percent. Pycnogenol supplements also help control blood sugar levels—important because high blood sugar promotes inflammation.

Curcumin More than 2,000 studies now support the anti-inflammatory benefits of curcumin, an extract of the spice turmeric. Turmeric is a common spice in Indian cooking and Ayurvedic medicine. Curcumin, which accounts for about 3 percent of turmeric, reduces inflammation through 97 different biochemical mechanisms, according to an article in *Biochemical Pharmacology*. Studies have found that supplements have benefits in a wide range of diseases, including rheumatoid arthritis, inflammatory bowel disease, pancreatitis, Alzheimer's, and cancer.

Fish oils Fish oils are rich in omega-3 fats, specifically eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA)—and arguably the healthiest of all dietary fats. The omega-3s serve as the precursors to hormone-like substances called eicosanoids, particularly anti-inflammatory prostaglandin E3. They reduce inflammation in a variety of health problems, including arthritis, asthma, and heart disease. The omega-3s have many other cardiovascular benefits as well, such as slowing the heart rate, being mild anti-coagulants, and improving the flexibility of blood vessels. Recent studies in the *British Medical Journal* and *Lancet* reported that fish oil supplements reduce the risk of hospitalizations, heart disease deaths, and deaths from all causes. Many experts recommend taking a minimum of 1,000 to 1,500 mg of combined EPA and DHA daily.

Gamma-linolenic acid (GLA) Often overlooked, this plant oil is another potent anti-inflammatory and one that works synergistically with the omega-3s. It increases the body's production of anti-inflammatory prostaglandin E1, which works with prostaglandin E3. It's extracted from the seeds of borage, black currant, and evening primrose. Consider taking 150 to 500 mg daily of GLA.

NATURAL WAYS TO REDUCE CHOLESTEROL

Elevated cholesterol levels are often (but not always) found with high CRP levels. These supplements may help naturally reduce cholesterol levels.

Beta-sitosterol This compound is found in many herbs, such as saw palmetto, and most vegetables. It reduces the absorption of cholesterol in the digestive tract and has cholesterol-lowering effects that approach those of prescription drugs. *Note:* Beta-sitosterol is a plant sterol, but it is *not* a steroid hormone. Try 1.3 to 3.6 grams daily with meals.

Niacin The niacin form of vitamin B3 has been used to improve lipid profiles since the 1950s. It can lower the "bad" low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol and increase the "good" high-density lipoprotein (HDL) form of cholesterol. *Note:* The cholesterol-lowering benefits of vitamin B3 are related to the niacin form of the vitamin, not the niacinamide form. However, niacin triggers the release of histamine, leading to a flushing sensation that lasts about one hour. Most people tolerate the flush and tingling very well, but others find it uncomfortable. The intensity of the flush decreases with regular intake of niacin.

Red yeast rice extract This supplement contains tiny and safe amounts of a naturally-occurring statin. A study published in 2008 in the *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* reported that a combination of red yeast rice, fish oils, and lifestyle changes resulted in a 42 percent decrease in LDL cholesterol, slightly more than a prescription statin drug. Other research has shown that red yeast rice alone can lower CRP levels by up to 50 percent. One study, conducted in China, showed that red yeast rice supplements reduced the odds of having a heart attack by almost half.

While the supplements listed above can certainly help reduce inflammation in the body, it's always worth remembering that nutrients form the foundation of our biochemistry and genes. Healthy nutrients support and enhance our biology, whereas unhealthy nutrients interfere with our biology. A diet that emphasizes natural and fresh foods, plus supplements, promotes good health. ■