

Natural Supplements Can Help Lower Lipids

BY DOUG BRUNK
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LA JOLLA, CALIF. — Several natural supplements are useful for lowering blood lipids, Erminia M. Guarneri, M.D., said at a meeting on natural supplements in evidence-based practice sponsored by the Scripps Clinic. They include:

► **Soluble fiber.** Ingesting 2-10 g/day of soluble fiber has been found to lower total cholesterol levels by 15%-18% (*Am. J. Clin. Nutr.* 1999;69:30-42). Common sources include oats, psyllium, pectin, and guar gum. GI complaints from ingesting soluble fiber are frequent.

► **Phytosterols.** Produced by plants, these substances impair intestinal absorption of cholesterol. Studies have found that 2-3 g/day of phytosterols can reduce LDL-cholesterol levels by 10%-15%. In one study of 167 patients on stable statin therapy, the 83 patients who received three servings per day of a plant stanol-ester spread showed reduction in LDL cholesterol of more than 16% at 8 weeks, compared with a nearly 7% reduction in the 84 patients who received a placebo spread.

The stanol spread provided the equivalent of 2-3 g/day of phytosterols (*Am. J. Cardiol.* 2000;86:46-52).

In an unpublished study of 14 Scripps patients who were "maxed out on nutrition and cholesterol-lowering medicines," adding 2 g/day of phytosterols led to a 14% reduction in total cholesterol, a 16% reduction in LDL cholesterol, an 11% reduction in triglycerides, and a 2% increase in HDL cholesterol.

Phytosterols are found in certain mar-

garines that can be purchased at the grocery store, but "I'd avoid doing that, especially when I look at some of these [food] labels, and I see partially hydrogenated oils," said Dr. Guarneri, founder and medical director of the Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine. She recommends getting phytosterols from two products: CholestePure (Emerson Ecologics) and UltraMeal Plus (Metagenics).

► **B vitamins.** Deficiencies of vitamin B₆, vitamin B₁₂, and folic acid have been linked

Poor Kidney Function Augurs Anemia in HF

NEW ORLEANS — Poor kidney function is the strongest indicator for anemia in patients with heart failure, according to the results of a large study in HMO patients.

A reduced glomerular filtration rate emerged as the strongest risk factor for developing anemia in 41,754 heart failure (HF) patients free of anemia at baseline, Alan S. Go, M.D., reported at the annual scientific sessions of the American Heart Association.

Anemia was a common occurrence in this HMO population with HF, with an incidence of 9% per year, according to Dr. Go of Kaiser Permanente of Northern California, Oakland. The study featured nearly 83,000 person-years of follow-up.

Chronic renal impairment is extremely common among HF patients. Roughly 40% of patients had a baseline glomerular filtration rate of less than 60 mL/min per 1.73 m². The risk of developing anemia during follow-up was proportionate to their degree of baseline renal impairment.

Heart failure patients with an estimated GFR of 45-59 mL/min per 1.73 m² were 34% more likely to become anemic than were those with a GFR of 60 or more. Those with a GFR of 30-44 had a more than twofold increased incidence of anemia, while patients with a GFR of 15-29 were at more than fourfold increased risk.

Among those patients with a baseline GFR less than 15 mL/min per 1.73 m² who weren't on dialysis, the incidence of anemia during follow-up was more than eight times greater than in patients with a GFR of at least 60. In those on dialysis, the rate increased nearly fivefold.

Other independent predictors of the development of anemia in a multivariate analysis included cirrhosis, with an adjusted 2.3-fold relative risk, compared with noncirrhotic patients, and HIV infection, which conferred an 80% increase in risk. African descent and age greater than 70 years were each associated with a 40% increased risk of becoming anemic, he said.

—Bruce Jancin

DEPRESSED PATIENTS NEED EMOTIONAL SYMPTOM RELIEF

Important Safety Information:

- Antidepressants increased the risk of suicidal thinking and behavior (suicidality) in short-term studies in children and adolescents with major depressive disorder (MDD) and other psychiatric disorders
- Patients started on therapy should be observed closely for clinical worsening, suicidality, or unusual changes in behavior
- Cymbalta is not approved for use in pediatric patients

Cymbalta should not be used concomitantly with monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) or thioridazine and not in patients with uncontrolled narrow-angle glaucoma.

Clinical worsening and suicide risk: All adult and pediatric patients being treated with an antidepressant for any indication should be observed closely for clinical worsening, suicidality, and unusual changes in behavior, especially when initiating drug therapy and when increasing or decreasing the dose. A health professional should be

immediately notified if the depression is persistently worse or there are symptoms that are severe, sudden, or were not part of the patient's presentation. If discontinuing treatment, taper the medication.

Cymbalta should not be administered to patients with end-stage renal disease (requiring dialysis) or severe renal impairment (CrCl <30 mL/min); or any hepatic insufficiency.

Cymbalta should generally not be prescribed to patients with substantial alcohol use.

Most common adverse events (≥5% and at least twice placebo) in MDD clinical trials were: nausea, dry mouth, constipation, fatigue, decreased appetite, somnolence, and increased sweating. Most common adverse events in diabetic peripheral neuropathic pain (DPNP) clinical trials were: nausea, somnolence, dizziness, constipation, dry mouth, increased sweating, decreased appetite, and asthenia.

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to elevated plasma homocysteine levels, which are a strong predictor of mortality in coronary artery disease patients.

In fact, one study of 587 coronary artery disease patients found that the risk of mortality for those with plasma homocysteine levels of less than 9.0 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ was 3.8% while the risk of mortality in those with levels of 15 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ or greater was 24.7%.

Dr. Guarneri recommends Cardio B (Ortho Molecular Products), a mix of folic acid and vitamins B₆ and B₁₂, “in one pill, instead of popping a bunch of pills,” she said at the meeting, which was cosponsored by the University of California, San Diego.

► **Niacin.** Regular use of niacin has been

found to lower LDL cholesterol by 5%-25%, lower triglycerides by 20%-50%, and raise HDL cholesterol by 15%-35%.

“The first treatment [for low HDL] is to get the weight off the midline,” she said. “But if I have to reach for a supplement to fix this, I fix it with niacin. Niacin doesn’t affect the LDL as much as it affects the LDL subtype. Frequently people will see me and say, ‘I’m drinking all this wine to raise my HDL.’ A lot of times all that wine gives you more weight on the midline, so that’s not necessarily the solution.”

Side effects may include flushing, hyperglycemia, hyperuricemia, upper GI distress, and hepatotoxicity.

Niacin is contraindicated in patients with liver disease, severe gout, or peptic ulcer.

“I like short-acting niacin so people can take it with each meal if they need to, as opposed to the long-acting prescription niacin, which you’re really only supposed to take once a day,” she added. “When I use short-acting niacins, I can also use them at higher doses. Start low and go up slowly, [but] you do have to monitor liver function.”

► **Magnesium.** For patients with arrhythmia, Dr. Guarneri called it one of her favorite supplements. Magnesium is a front-line treatment for torsades de pointes, and some studies have found it beneficial for mitral valve prolapse patients who have

low magnesium levels.

“At least one study demonstrated a decrease in blood pressure with a 1,000-mg dose [of magnesium],” she said. “If someone has normal renal function, and they have arrhythmia or skipped heartbeats, and I get them off caffeine and sugar, I will use chelated magnesium and titrate it and warn them about the potential for soft stool.”

The cardiac benefits of the following supplements are less clear, Dr. Guarneri noted: L-arginine, coenzyme Q₁₀, hawthorn, ginkgo biloba, red yeast rice, policosanol, and horse chestnut. She said that she has no financial interest in any of the products she recommended. ■



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