

CHOLESTEROL ANXIETY THE FEAR OF HEART ATTACK OR SEXUAL DYSFUNCTION?

WITH MICHELE CHEVALLEY HEDGE

Mr Biz Executive paused ... looked me square in the eye holding his cholesterol lowering pills and said: "So tell me, you're the nutritionist, why shouldn't I have my cake and eat it too?!"

Mr Biz Executive, Ms Fifty Something and many other patients have come to me with 'cholesterol anxiety'.

Should I take this cholesterol-lowering drug (statins) that my GP recommended, does it really come with all these side effects written on the warning label , can I really eat, drink and be merry and still lower my cholesterol with these pills?

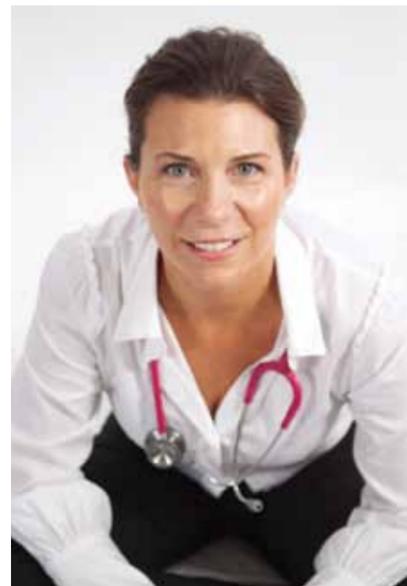
Of course they have cholesterol anxiety... I have it and I am a nutritionist! Some patients are telling me their GPs are suggesting taking statins as preventative measures and not even discussing the most common possible side effects. I understand that GPs do not have the time in their fast paced offices to offer nutritional advice and I completely understand the nature of a time poor doctor. What stirred my curiosity was prescribing medicine as prevention of cardio vascular disease rather than even considering a simple, healthy view on diet and lifestyle.

All of these issues prompted me to do a thorough review on the effects of healthy and unhealthy cholesterol, cholesterol reducing medication and the evidence based literature on cholesterol.

Cholesterol is the body's version of fat, and contrary to popular belief cholesterol, it can be your friend. It

needs to stay within a healthy range, and new evidence states not a low level. Cholesterol's job is to repair and protect, and it is essential for nourishing the brain and nervous system. The brain is 70 per cent cholesterol and it could not function properly without it. Hormones like oestrogen and testosterone are made from cholesterol. Bile salts (for digestion) are made from cholesterol. Cholesterol is also a powerful antioxidant. Indeed we need a healthy level of cholesterol for optimum health.

The question of the safety of statins comes into play when they are being taken by Mr Biz Executive as "prevention" or because their cholesterol is "a little on the high side", not in its ability to reduce dangerously high cholesterol levels. The side effects from use of statin drugs are widely published: The depletion of CoQ10 (vital enzyme for energy and cardiovascular health), muscle pain and weakness, cognitive impairment and memory loss, depression, decreases function of your immune system, liver problems (patients taking statins need regular blood tests for any liver dysfunction). In clinic I am seeing an increasing numbers of patients with memory loss who have been taking cholesterol-lowering pills. A former NASA



scientist and astronaut Dr Duane Graveline MD suffered such memory loss while taking his cholesterol pill. He claims he saved his memory by stopping the pill and eating lots of cholesterol-rich foods. Since then he has described his experience in his book, Lipitor: Thief of Memory, Statin Drugs and the Misguided War on Cholesterol.

But let's go back to hormones... hormones are made from cholesterol? YES, so what happens to our hormones when we reduce our cholesterol too dangerously low levels?

Well according to a new study that evaluated nearly 3,500 men who had statin therapy prescribed to lower their cholesterol it also appears to lower their testosterone.

"Current statin therapy is associated with a twofold increased prevalence of hypogonadism," a condition in which men don't produce enough testosterone, study author Giovanni Corona MD PHD, a researcher at the University of Florence in Italy.

"This is huge," says Irwin Goldstein MD, director of sexual medicine at Alvarado Hospital in San Diego and editor-in-chief of the Journal of Sexual Medicine.

The study results, he says, demonstrate the need for more study to replicate the finding and figure out the reason for the link. Goldstein noted in a different interview that, in his practice, he sees patients "several times a week" who say that their sexual performance declined after they started taking a statin.

For patients using statin therapies the message is to pay attention to early warning signs of testosterone deficiency. Low testosterone signs may include mood changes, reduced sex drive, tired, and/or change of athletic performance.

This should not come as such a big surprise to us even the label on Lipitor does warn of the possibility of interference with hormone production. "As described in the Lipitor US prescribing information, statins interfere with cholesterol synthesis and theoretically might blunt adrenal and/or gonadal steroid production." And then continues to state on the information inside the package: Therapy with lipid-lowering agents should be a component of multiple-risk-factor intervention in individuals at increased risk of atherosclerotic vascular disease due to hypercholesterolaemia. Lipid-altering agents should be used in addition to a diet restricted in saturated fat and

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cholesterol only when the response to diet and other non-pharmacological measures has been inadequate.

I was not able to find any research on the use of cholesterol lowering medication and women's oestrogen, testosterone, and progesterone, but most middle age, peri menopausal women , who know the benefits of youthful oestrogen on their unwrinkled faces and sex lives would not want to risk lowering their hormones without medical cause. I feel certain that we will see some of these studies in the coming months.

Ok so here is the take away message - don't just read what I am writing. Go and do some of your own investigation and be informed. People may turn to medications alone to correct health problems, but this Band-Aid approach does not correct underlying issues, and a Band Aid is just that, a cover. A whopping 75 per cent of cholesterol is produced by your liver, which is influenced by your insulin levels...a high antioxidant, low glycemic index, nutritious diet, can benefit cholesterol regulation. Notice I did not write a high antioxidant, nutritious, low fat diet - low fat is out - good, healthy fat is in.

So can you have your cake and eat it too? Ask yourself.... is that pill worth the cake, the memory or the sex?

Michele Chevalley Hedge is a Sydney-based nutritionist, who specialises in evidence based research for her clients, their GP's and publications. Michele operates her own practice, A Healthy View, along with writing books and articles on nutritional medicine. Michele also runs Nourishment Cleanse Retreats – whole food detoxifying cleanses – throughout the year in Australia and overseas. For further information and free dietary guidelines for healthy cholesterol please email on michele@ahealthyview.com.au.

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