

Can Supplements Be Beneficial for Heart Disease?

Considering a supplement to help manage your cholesterol levels? Some supplements, when coupled with a healthy lifestyle, may play a role.

The evidence is clear. Good nutrition and regular exercise are major players in the prevention and treatment of heart disease. Taking a statin drug is standard therapy to lower cholesterol and triglycerides, and to raise HDL (good cholesterol). But researchers are confirming that some vitamins and/or plant substances may also play a role in managing heart disease.

What works

The American Heart Association (AHA) has endorsed fish oil and plant stanol supplements to help manage heart disease. Many doctors also advise getting more vitamin D. The supplements can be used along with diet and exercise.

But first talk to your doctor before you take any supplements. Even natural substances may interfere with the effectiveness of other medicines you are taking, such as blood thinners.

Fish oil, found in fatty fish, contains high amounts of the omega-3 fats DHA and EPA. These fats may help reduce the chances of blood clots, clogged arteries, irregular heartbeats, high triglycerides and death from heart disease.

- The AHA recommends at least 1 gram daily of DHA and EPA combined if you have heart disease.
- Though oily fish is preferable (salmon, mackerel, sardines), your doctor may also suggest EPA/DHA supplements.
- If you have high triglycerides, your doctor may suggest 2 to 4 grams of EPA/DHA per day.

Talk to your doctor about these options and the dose that might be right for you.

Plant stanols/sterols are substances that occur naturally in many plant foods. Two grams taken every day has been shown to lower LDL cholesterol by up to 15 percent.

- You can now get stanols or sterols in some margarine spreads, orange juice, yogurt, cereals and even granola bars.
- They can also be found in gel form as a supplement.
- To get the best benefit, you may need a daily dose of 2 grams through food or supplements.
- With the OK from your doctor, you can take them along with statins to boost cholesterol reduction.

Pairing a stanol supplement with an omega-3 supplement may have even greater benefits. Some studies have found that taking both together caused greater drops in triglycerides, total cholesterol and LDLs, while boosting HDLs.

Vitamin D may be an up-and-coming player in the field of heart disease treatment and prevention. People with low blood levels of vitamin D are known to be at higher risk for heart attack, congestive heart failure, hypertension, diabetes and earlier death.

- There are no specific guidelines yet for vitamin D in the treatment or prevention of heart disease. But getting adequate vitamin D through foods or supplements is widely advised for bone health. It has great potential for use in other chronic illness, too.
- The National Institutes of Health recommends 400 IU for healthy people ages 51 through 70. Healthy adults aged 71 and over should try to get 600 IU daily.

- The National Osteoporosis Foundation suggests that adults age 50 and older should get 800 IU to 1,000 IU of vitamin D each day.

Ask your doctor what dose is right for you.

What about red yeast rice?

Red yeast rice is made from yeast grown and fermented on rice. It has been used for centuries in China. It contains monocolin A, a substance that helps block the body's production of cholesterol. Monocolin A is the active ingredient in lovastatin (Mevacor), a widely used statin drug.

- In one small study, a combination of red yeast rice, fish oil and lifestyle changes helped lower cholesterol and triglycerides in some people who could not tolerate statin medicines.
- Some people get muscle pain as a side effect of statin drugs. Red yeast rice, which contains lower amounts of monocolin A, may be an option for these people.

NOTE: Currently, the FDA bans the sale of red yeast rice supplements that contain monocolin A (such as cholestin), claiming it is a drug. So without proper regulation, experts generally advise sticking to prescription statins for a safer, more standardized dose.

Researchers continue to explore the possible benefits and side effects of other supplements such as guggul resin, hawthorne and policosanol. So far, though, a clear link to heart health has yet to be proven.

Remember, no supplement can take the place of a good diet. Get plenty of fresh fruits and veggies, whole grains, lean proteins and healthy fats, and nix the processed foods.