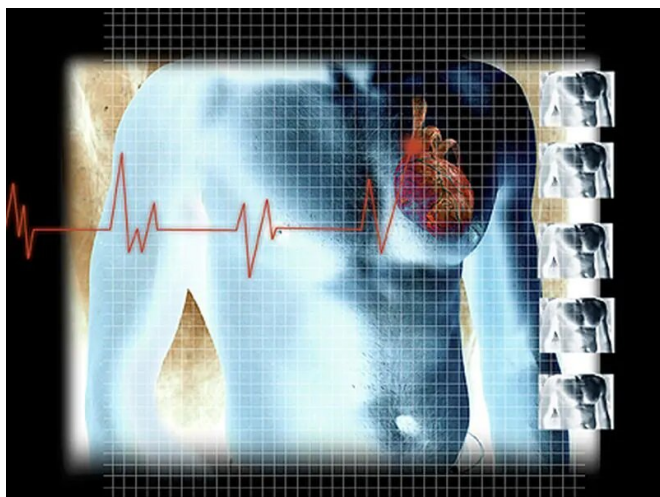


Prescription fish oil pill lowers heart attack risk in those already on statins

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(HealthDay) —Patients who have high triglycerides *and* take cholesterol-lowering statins to lower their risk for heart attack or stroke can cut that risk by another 30 percent by adding a high-dose omega-3 fatty acid pill, investigators report.

The prescription drug, called Vascepa, is not to be confused with over-the-counter dietary omega-3 (often fish oil) supplements. Such supplements typically contain far lower doses of the critical omega-3 fatty acid called EPA and have not undergone a rigorous safety and effectiveness review by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Since 2012, the FDA has approved Vascepa (icosapent ethyl) for patients whose triglyceride fat levels exceed 500 milligrams per deciliter of blood.

Now, an updated analysis of research first released last September suggests Vascepa markedly reduces a patient's lifetime [risk](#) of dying from [heart disease](#); experiencing a nonlethal [heart attack](#) or stroke, or needing heart surgery or hospitalization for a heart complication.

"We found a 30 percent reduction in total ischemic events," said lead author Dr. Deepak Bhatt, referring to any number of serious heart problems caused by restricted blood flow. "That is a very large degree of clinical benefit."

Among 1,000 patients who take Vascepa for five years, nearly 160 serious heart problems would be prevented, he noted. That includes 12 cardiovascular-related deaths, 42 heart [attacks](#), 14 strokes, 76 coronary artery bypasses and 16 hospitalizations for unstable angina (chest pain or heaviness) while at rest or during moderate activity.

Bhatt is executive director of international cardiovascular programs at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

He and his colleagues are slated to present their research—which was funded by the New Jersey-based drug manufacturer Amarin Pharma, Inc.—this week at a meeting of the American College of Cardiology, in New Orleans.

Research presented at meetings is typically considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

The study team likened the high dose of EPA contained in Vascepa to eating more than 20 servings of fish a week, minus the problematic saturated fat.

The updated findings concern the "REDUCE-IT" study, which involved nearly 8,200 patients. All had high cholesterol and were taking statins to control it.

This, investigators said, meant patients were receiving a good standard of care. But that care did not mean they were out of the cardiac woods. All also had high triglycerides, and about 70 percent had a heart disease diagnosis. The other 30 percent were diabetic and were thought to be at risk for future heart complications.

For the trial, half took 2 grams of Vascepa twice a day for an average of about five years. Half took a placebo.

Initial results suggested a 25 percent reduction in the risk for experiencing a *first* cardiac event, such as a heart attack or stroke.

Now, researchers have also examined subsequent events as well—for example, a fatal stroke after an initial heart attack.

And that new analysis showed a 30 percent lower lifetime risk for heart attack, stroke and the like.

Eileen Handberg is research professor of medicine, and program director of the Cardiovascular Clinical Trials Program at the University of Florida. She was not involved with the study.

Handberg said the findings are important, because even when heart patients receive the very best of care, some risk remains. And patients with a risk for heart disease tend to experience more than one event—meaning multiple heart attacks, or a [heart](#) attack and then a stroke, she added.

"But here, the data shows that this drug reduces that risk, whether it's a first, second or third event," Handberg said. "That is very [important information](#) for [patients](#) to have, because it means there is a way to reduce risk over the long term."

She underscored the research team's warning that consumers should not look to over-the-counter fish-oil supplements for the same protection.

"Supplements are not manufactured to consistent standards and are unregulated," Handberg said. "So you have no real idea of what you're taking."

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention offers more on [heart disease](#).

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