Niacin: Not All Brands Are Safe or Effective, But Pick the Right One and it Could be Better Than Statins

Many people take over-the-counter niacin as a replacement for, or complement to, cholesterol-lowering drugs. A new survey shows that these products do not always contain the amount of niacin, or nicotinic acid (vitamin B3) described on the label. The survey found broad variations in the products, ranging from no available niacin to toxic levels of niacin. The inconsistencies are attributed to the fact that niacin is classified by the FDA as a dietary supplement. This means that the product is entirely unregulated; therefore, the manufacturers do not have to prove quality, safety, or efficacy.

The survey of niacin products was conducted by C. Daniel Meyers, MD, Veterans Affairs Medical Center, Long Beach, CA, and colleagues, who acknowledged that niacin is one of the first agents found to raise the level of good cholesterol (HDL) and lower the level of bad cholesterol (LDL) and triglycerides when taken in daily doses of 1,000-4,000 mg. The worst side effect is “niacin flushing,” that is, redness, itching, burning, which starts within 10-15 minutes after swallowing the tablet and can last up to an hour.

Dr. Meyers and colleagues looked at 29 commonly used over-the-counter niacin products (500-mg tablets or capsules) from three categories: Immediate-release, sustained-release, and “no-flush.” They calculated the monthly cost for each product purchased in pharmacies, health-food stores or over the Internet. Ironically, the no-flush preparations, the most expensive ($21.70) of all, do not contain available nicotinic acid. And some brands of the sustained-release preparations contain amounts of niacin so high as to be toxic to the liver. The safest products are, in yet another ironic twist, the least expensive ($7.10). They are the immediate-release preparations, which contain, according to Dr. Meyers and colleagues, “the full amount of free nicotinic acid used safely for more than 40 years” and “shown to prevent cardiovascular disease and death.” The cheapest brands in this category are Rugby, Bartell’s, Natural Factors—all are under $5.19 for a one-month supply (Annals of Internal Medicine, 12/16/03).

The biggest irony of all regarding niacin is the possibility that it is safer and just as effective as statin drugs—for men, that is. In the introduction to this survey, Dr. Meyers and colleagues cite the Coronary Drug Project, which followed 3,908 men taking a placebo or niacin therapy. After nine years of follow-up, the men in the latter group not only had a lower rate of non-fatal heart attacks but also an 11% lower rate of all-cause mortality than the men in the placebo group.

Topical Fluorides Work for Kids

Regular use of topical fluoride clearly improves dental health in children—regardless of whether they live in areas where the drinking water is fluoridated. Children who applied fluoride in the form of gel, rinse, toothpaste or sealant, had fewer decayed, missing or filled teeth. The benefit increased if the children applied fluoride under adult supervision.

These results came from a Cochrane review of 133 clinical trials in which children, aged five to 16 years, had been randomly assigned to a group that applied topical fluoride or to a group that did not use this treatment for at least one year. No adverse effects of topical fluoride use were detected.

The review team led by V.C.C. Marinho concluded that the benefits of topical fluoride have been firmly established by a “sizable body of evidence from randomized controlled trials.” But the reviewers were unable to reach a definite conclusion about any long-term adverse effects. Furthermore, they suspect that fluoride sealants may have a greater effect than the other topical treatments but more research is needed to determine how big a difference this treatment makes and whether it involves adverse effects.

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