Close Up

the other sterol

HIGH CHOLESTEROL CAN BE A KILLER. SCIENCE AND NATURE JOIN FORCES IN A BATTLE FOR THE HEART.

By Kimberly J. Retzlaff

High cholesterol is a major accomplice to America’s No. 1 killer, coronary heart disease. And nearly 20 percent of American adults have elevated cholesterol, according to the American Heart Association. While the pharmaceutical industry offers a class of drugs called statins to get cholesterol levels in check, the natural products industry has some answers of its own—plant sterol and stanol esters.
These compounds are widely recognized for their propensity to lower total and LDL ("bad") cholesterols. Plant sterols and stanols are essential plant cell components that occur naturally in fruits, vegetables, seeds, legumes and nuts. But it's hard to absorb enough of them from food to significantly affect cholesterol levels.

Here's where science stepped in: To make plant sterols and stanols more available and useful, researchers attached or "esterified" these compounds to fatty acids, creating sterol esters—and found that the resulting plant sterol or stanol esters helped lower LDL.

In September 2000, the US Food and Drug Administration agreed that the esters are effective, and it approved a health claim saying that adding 1.3g of sterol esters or 3.4g of stanol esters daily to a low-fat diet can reduce the risk of heart disease by lowering cholesterol. These dosages are very well researched, and additional investigation has shown no added benefits—or increased risks—from daily doses of up to 9g of sterol esters or 5.1g of stanol esters.

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Because these esters inhibit the absorption of cholesterol, scientists worried that high doses of sterol esters might inhibit the absorption of vital fat-soluble nutrients as well. But researchers at the Chicago Center for Clinical Research reported in the August 2001 issue of the Journal of the American College of Nutrition that people taking up to 9g per day of sterol esters maintained normal blood levels of fat-soluble vitamins such as A, D, K and E, except for some forms of vitamin A. Also, two separate but related studies conducted at TNO Nutrition and Food Research in Zeist, the Netherlands, found similar decreases in the same forms of vitamin A at doses of only 1.6g per day. However, all of these studies concluded that plant sterol esters are effective for lowering cholesterol and safe for long-term use.

Besides being recommended for preventing high cholesterol, plant sterol and stanol esters are now also suggested for patients who already have high cholesterol. The National Cholesterol Education Program specifically names plant sterol and stanol esters as a way to increase the cholesterol-lowering effects of its Therapeutic Lifestyle Changes diet—an eating plan that limits saturated fats to a maximum of 7 percent of total daily calories and limits dietary cholesterol to fewer than 200mg per day. And investigators at Wageningen University in the Netherlands have found that combining sterol or stanol esters with statin therapy is more effective than doubling the drug dose, as reported in August 2003 in the Mayo Clinic Proceedings.

Adding sterol and stanol esters to a low-fat diet is easy, as manufacturers have added them to popular everyday items such as margarine, salad dressings and vegetable oils. They can also be consumed in supplement form. With this many options and such a huge benefit, what is there to lose...other than high cholesterol and a risk of heart disease?