

Family Medicine Clerkship Plain Language Summary

Title: Fish oil and heart disease prevention and cholesterol level improvement

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Plain Language Summary:

Heart disease is a common problem in the United States. Every year over 600,000 deaths related to heart attacks occur. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in both men and women. Heart disease affects all races.

There are multiple ways to reduce your risk of developing heart disease. Changes in your lifestyle can make a big difference. These changes include improving your diet and increasing exercise. These are often the only changes you need to make. Diets low in fats and high in fruits and vegetables can improve your health. It can also reduce your risk for developing heart disease. You may have heard your doctor talk about “good” and “bad” cholesterol. Bad cholesterol is called LDL and it is found in fatty food. High levels of the LDL in the blood over time can increase your risk of developing heart disease. The good cholesterol, or HDL, can decrease your risk of future heart disease. Your doctor may check for these levels in a simple blood test. Your doctor may also look at triglyceride levels in the same blood test. Triglycerides are a type of fat. Elevated amounts in the blood over time can also increase your risk for future heart disease.

Sometimes changes to the diet and increases in exercise may not be enough to improve your cholesterol (lipid) levels. In these cases your doctor might prescribe a medication to help with your lipid levels. Many people also use an over the counter medicine called omega 3 which is found in fish oil tablets. These fish oil tablets have been shown to decrease the triglyceride levels in the body. However, they can also increase your LDL levels. Research has not shown that fish oil decreases your overall risk for future heart disease. You should talk to your doctor before starting fish oil. Your doctor will want to check your lipid levels before and after starting it. If you are already using fish oil, you can keep using it as long as your doctor watches your lipid levels.

It is important to mention that some people suspect fish oil could have some bad side effects. Small amounts of chemicals like mercury might be present in these tablets. It is possible that these chemicals could cause diseases like cancer. Some people also suspect that they could cause problems with thinking or with getting pregnant. These possible side effects have not been proven. It is always important to talk to your doctor before starting any new medication or over the counter medicine to decide what is best for you.

Additional Resources:

For more information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<http://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/statistics.htm>

Mayo Clinic
http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/fish-oil/NS_patient-fishoil

Key Words:

Heart disease
fish oil
cholesterol
LDL
HDL

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