

Fish oil beats statin drugs

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We've all heard that cholesterol-lowering statins, such as Lipitor and Zocor, stop heart attacks and save lives. Up to 15 million Americans take statins. **But a new analysis in the Archives of Internal Medicine finds omega-3 fish oil far more lifesaving than statin drugs.**

Swiss researchers reviewed 97 double-blind studies of the effectiveness of statins, two other pharmaceuticals, niacin, diet and fish oil in preventing cardiac deaths. Best bets: statins and fish oil. And, surprisingly, **fish oil reduced heart deaths 32%,** compared with 22% for statins. **Fish oil also was superior at warding off death from any cause.** Statins cut overall deaths by 13%; fish oil by 23%.

WHAT'S THE SECRET? It's not cholesterol. Fish oil cut cholesterol by only 2%, statins by 20%. **Researchers speculate that fish oil works by reducing inflammation and triglycerides, stabilizing heart rhythms, normalizing vascular function and thwarting clots.**

HOW MUCH? OF WHAT? Both eating omega-3 fatty fish and taking fish oil supplements work, but it's not clear whether one is better, says lead researcher Heiner C. Bucher. The best dose is unclear, too, but Bucher points out that a daily capsule of 900 milligrams of omega-3 (DHA and EPA) cut cardiac deaths in heart patients by 28% in a major Italian study. That is omega-3 equal to 2.5 ounces of Alaskan salmon daily.

BOTTOM LINE: Don't quit statins without consulting your doctor. Bucher says fish oil plus statins might be even more effective, but tests are needed. The FDA says to limit omega-3 supplements to 2,000mg a day.

The fat in salmon and sardines saved more lives than did statin drugs.

SOURCES FOR EATSMART July 24:

Comparative analysis of fish oil and statins

Bucher, Heiner C. Am J Med 2002; 112:298-304

Omega-3 cuts cardiac deaths

Lancet 1999 Aug 7; 354(9177):447-55