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November 22, 04

Fiber supplement can reduce high-cholesterol drug dose

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In Focus

Researchers from the University of Medicine and Dentistry (UMDNJ) - Robert Wood Johnson Medical School recently announced the results of a study that shows giving a psyllium supplement to patients currently taking simvastatin 10 mg for lowering LDL cholesterol is as effective as taking a double-dose of simvastatin (20 mg) alone. The study was presented at the American Heart Association's scientific sessions in New Orleans.

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"The results of this study present a breakthrough in the treatment of high-cholesterol, providing patients with a viable option to taking high-dosage statins to lower cholesterol," said Dr. Abel E. Moreyra, professor of medicine at UMDNJ-Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, and lead author of the study. "This is an important new perspective because while statins are a safe and effective way to lower cholesterol, there are risks associated with a higher dosage treatment."

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The 12-week study, which included a four-week diet stabilization period, comprised 67 patients with baseline LDL cholesterol ranging from 161 to 186 mg/dL. Patients were assigned one of three random treatment groups. One group received simvastatin 20 mg plus placebo; another simvastatin 10 mg plus placebo; and the third simvastatin 10 mg plus psyllium (Metamucil). Following eight weeks of treatment, the researchers found that patients taking psyllium supplementation had an additional 6 percent reduction in LDL cholesterol compared with those taking the 10 mg statin drug alone.

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According to the American Heart Association, approximately 37 million adults have total cholesterol levels of 240 mg/dL or higher, which

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puts them at high risk for developing heart disease. When there is too much cholesterol in the blood, cholesterol and other substances build up in the walls of the arteries. Over time, the build-up causes "hardening of the arteries" so that arteries become narrowed and blood flow to the heart is restricted. Blood carries oxygen to the heart, and if the flow is severely restricted, a heart attack could result.

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"This new research further validates what doctors and researchers have been saying for decades - fiber plays a critical factor in a nutritionally balanced diet," said Dr. James Anderson, chairman of the National Fiber Council and professor of the Metabolic Research Group at the University of Kentucky. "With millions of Americans falling short of the recommended 32 grams of fiber per day, these findings make it even more critical for physicians to educate all consumers about how fiber works in the digestive system and how it contributes to overall health."

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