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Fighting Cholesterol With Fewer Drug Side Effects

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By LAURA JOHANNES

Recent scientific evidence suggests a form of vitamin B-5 can lower cholesterol with few side effects. The results suggest the dietary supplement could be useful in people who can't tolerate the side effects of cholesterol-lowering drugs, but cardiologists say more research is needed.

Pantethine is a derivative of vitamin B-5 sold as a cholesterol-lowering drug in Japan. It is available in the U.S. from a variety of companies as a dietary supplement. More than two dozen small published studies have shown it appears to lower blood cholesterol, and last year, a 120-person North American study boosted its credibility.



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A dietary supplement with Pantethine.

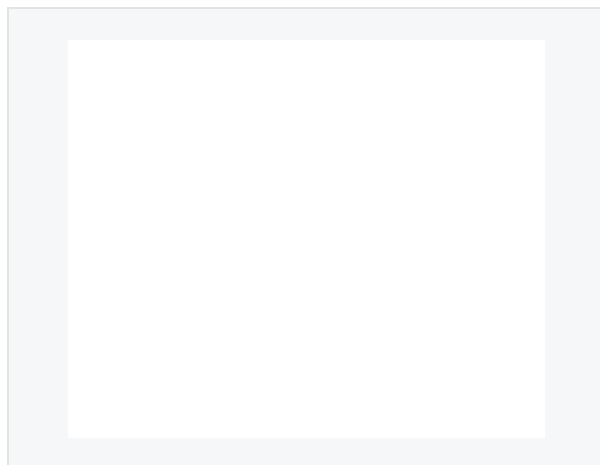
How it works isn't known, but some scientists point to the fact that it is a building block for coenzyme A, a molecule important in fat burning.

Pantethine represents "an interesting new approach in an era in which we are looking for alternatives for people" who can't tolerate commonly prescribed cholesterol drugs, called statins, says Vincent Bufalino, an American Heart Association

spokesman and senior medical director of cardiology at Advocate Medical Group, a large Chicago physician practice. But the 120-person study, while "well done," is too small to draw firm conclusions and much larger studies are needed, he says.

Another weakness is that so far no major published study has tested pantethine with statins. If the two work well together, physicians say, it might be possible for patients to add the dietary supplement in order to take a lower dose of statins.

Some scientific literature suggests that pantethine, like statins, inhibits an enzyme important in cholesterol synthesis, in addition to boosting levels of coenzyme A.



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This effect is likely to be much milder than statins and is probably not the primary way it works, says Danielle Citrolo, a pharmacist and manager of technical services for Kyowa Hakko USA, a unit of Japan's [Kirin Holdings](#) 2503.TO +1.62%. Kyowa Hakko manufactures the Pantestin brand of pantethine, which is available in supplements sold by 38 U.S. companies. The company funded the 120-person study.

Level Best

Here are the benefits or risks of different levels of total cholesterol:

- **Less than 200 mg/dL:** This level puts a person at lower risk for coronary heart disease.
- **200 to 239 mg/dL:** Borderline high level of cholesterol.
- **240 mg/dL and above:** High blood cholesterol. A person with this level has more than twice the risk of coronary heart disease as someone whose cholesterol is below 200 mg/dL.

Source: American Heart Association

Cholesterol is a waxy substance that can clog the arteries and increase the risk of heart disease. Some 98.8 million Americans over age 20, or 44% of that age group, have blood cholesterol over 200 milligrams per deciliter, the level over which risk of heart disease increases, according to the American Heart Association. Exercise and diet changes are among the typical ways to treat cholesterol.

Statins, a class of cholesterol-lowering drugs, are sometimes prescribed. But 10% to 15% of people cannot tolerate their side effects, which include muscle soreness and fatigue, says Dr. Bufalino.

Pantethine, studied for years in smaller trials—many outside the U.S.—got a boost last year with the publication of the 120-patient North American study in Nutrition Research. The four-month study, conducted by researchers in Florida and Canada, tested Kyowa Hakko's Pantestin in patients with mild-to-moderate elevations in cholesterol.

Subjects taking Pantestin tablets daily, in addition to a healthy diet, saw their total cholesterol fall 3% more than control subjects getting the same diet plus a placebo pill. Low-density lipoprotein, or "bad" cholesterol, dropped 4% more in the subjects getting Pantestin.

"Our numbers are not dramatic, but they are consistent," says co-author John Rumberger, a cardiologist at Princeton Longevity Center in Princeton, N.J. Initially skeptical, Dr. Rumberger says he now tells patients—particularly those with only mild-to-moderate cholesterol elevation—that pantethin is "safe and may be beneficial."

Pantethine, at least so far, appears to have minimal side effects. In a 2005 review of 28 clinical trials encompassing 646 subjects, pantethine was found effective in lowering cholesterol on average, and 1.4% of patients experienced side effects, mostly mild gastrointestinal issues. "It has the same risk as pepperoni pizza," says Richard A. Stein, a professor at New York University School of Medicine in New York.

But the average study length in the review was only 13 weeks. Longer studies of six months to a year are needed to test long-term safety, says Dr. Stein, an AHA spokesman.

Gastrointestinal side effects of pantethine often go away within a couple of weeks, Kyowa Hakko says.

Many companies sell pantethine alone, often with suggested doses ranging from 600 to 900 milligrams a day, typically two pills. It costs about \$10 to \$20 for a month's supply.

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Other companies, such as Pharmavite, a Northridge, Calif., unit of Japan's Otsuka Pharmaceutical Co., sell blends. The company's Nature Made CholestOff Complete soft gels contain a blend of Pantestin and plant compounds that the company says help lower cholesterol. The blend, which costs \$38.99 for a 20-day supply, hasn't been tested in a clinical trial.

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