

ALL ABOUT LIPIDS AND HIV

WHAT ARE LIPIDS?

Many HIV-positive people have increased levels of lipids (fat) in their blood. There are two main types of lipids:

- **Cholesterol.** Our bodies need cholesterol to form cell membranes, produce sex hormones, help with digestion and manufacture bone-strengthening vitamin D. While the liver makes most of our cholesterol, some of it comes from the foods we eat, mostly animal products such as meat, dairy and eggs. There is both “good” (HDL) cholesterol and “bad” (LDL) cholesterol. Too much LDL cholesterol in the blood can bind to artery walls and cause plaque to form. This reduces the flow of blood, and could possibly lead to a heart attack or stroke.
- **Triglycerides.** These provide cells with the fuel they need to function properly. Like cholesterol, triglycerides are produced naturally by the liver, but they also come from foods, especially sugar and saturated fats. High triglyceride levels can cause damage to the pancreas (pancreatitis) and may also increase the risk for heart disease.

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE HAVE ELEVATED LIPID LEVELS?

Increases in cholesterol and triglycerides are frequently seen in people taking HIV medications. It’s not clear why HIV drugs cause these unhealthy lipid changes, but most of the protease inhibitors (with the exception of Reyataz) and some of the nucleoside analogues (notably Zerit) have been shown to contribute to these problems.

HIV drugs are not the only possible causes, however. As people with HIV continue to live longer, they must also contend with “typical” causes for lipid problems: aging, eating food rich in saturated fats, and not getting enough exercise.

IS THERE A HIGHER RISK FOR HEART ATTACK OR STROKE?

Studies have found that people on lipid-raising HIV meds are at an increased risk for heart attacks and strokes. However, most of the patients studied had a number of other risk factors for heart disease, including family history, smoking and drug use. It’s difficult to determine how much HIV medications contribute to the overall risk for a cardiovascular problem. Experts believe that the benefits of HIV treatment still outweigh the potential risks of therapy.

HOW CAN I IMPROVE MY LIPID LEVELS?

In addition to important lifestyle changes that can help control your lipid levels and reduce the risk for heart disease (see “Quick Tips”), there are also a number of treatment options:

- **Switch HIV drugs.** If your lipids are high while you are on a protease inhibitor, it might be possible to switch to a more lipid-friendly PI, such as Reyataz (atazanavir), or a non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitor, such as Sustiva (efavirenz) or Viramune (nevirapine). Similarly, a switch from Zerit (stavudine) to another nucleoside analogue may be beneficial.
- **Add a lipid-lowering med.** Statins (Pravachol, Lipitor), cholesterol-absorption inhibitors (Zetia), fibrates (TriCor, Lopid) and other medications have been shown to help reduce cholesterol and triglyceride levels in HIV-positive people. Side effects and drug interactions are possible, so be sure to discuss these options with your health care provider.

QUICK TIPS

Lifestyle changes can help reduce your risk for heart problems.

■ DIET

Follow a low-saturated-fat, low-cholesterol diet, with less than 7% of your calories coming from saturated fat and less than 200 mg of dietary cholesterol per day.

■ STOP SMOKING

Cigarette smoking increases lipid levels and sharply raises the risk for heart problems. It’s never too late to quit!

■ LIMIT SUGAR AND ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Sugar-rich foods and alcohol can increase triglycerides; experts recommend reducing your intake of both.

■ WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

Losing weight is especially important for those with high triglyceride and/or cholesterol levels and large waist measurements (more than 40 inches for men and more than 35 inches for women).

■ PRESSURE POINT

Know your blood pressure and take steps to knock it down if it’s high. Controlling obesity, quitting smoking and reducing alcohol and fat intake should help.

■ GET PHYSICAL

Regular exercise is recommended for everyone. It can help control lipids, diabetes, obesity and blood pressure—four factors that increase heart risks.

For more about lipids, visit POZ.com