Statins: Side Effects & Possible Solutions

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Since their introduction, the number of prescriptions for the cholesterol lowering family of drugs referred to as statins has grown to 100 million per year. Recent studies suggest that up to 20% of people taking statins develop muscle pain. This equates to 1.5 million or more people taking statins each year who experience muscle related side effects. The exact cause for the muscle symptoms induced by the statins is not known.

Symptoms of statin induced myopathy include: painful muscles, inflamed muscles, muscle breakdown, elevated levels of the muscle enzyme Creatine Kinase (CK), muscle weakness, nighttime muscle cramps, tendon pain and fatigue. These symptoms can affect many areas of the body and mimic other disorders of the musculoskeletal system. The term myopathy implies any type of muscle related problem. Studies show that even without the elevation of CK levels, muscle biopsies have shown inflammation and microscopic muscle damage in some people taking statins.

Interestingly, one small study pointed to Vitamin D deficiency as a secondary factor that causes muscle pain and suggested that by correcting the Vitamin D deficiency, symptoms of muscle pain improved. The use of COQ10 to treat or avoid these side effects has been shown to be equivocal at best.

There are basically two (2) different categories of statins; simvastatin (Zocor) and atorvastatin (Lipitor), which are more commonly associated with myalgia, and the water soluble statins such as pravastatins (Pravachol) and fluvastatin (Lescol), which are less likely to cause muscle pain and
potential drug to drug interactions.

In general the risk factors for myopathy include: female gender, advanced age, kidney or liver disease, diabetes, EtOH use and drug interactions. It is also advised to avoid prolonged vigorous exercise as this may predispose for statin related muscle pain.

Once this side effect is recognized and the statin is discontinued, symptoms can persist for up to three (3) months. A recent article published by researchers from Johns Hopkins described a possible auto-immune reaction in patients with persistent muscle pain.

If you think you or someone you know may have these types of symptoms, we encourage you to bring this to your physician’s attention.

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