

# Niacin: Lower Your Cholesterol

**L**owering your cholesterol protects you from heart attacks and stroke. Losing weight, being more physically active, and changing your diet all help lower cholesterol. Your physician also may suggest that you take niacin, a B vitamin, in addition to having a healthy lifestyle.

## How does niacin work?

Niacin is a B vitamin that can cut down on the amount of cholesterol your liver makes. Most of the cholesterol in our bodies is made naturally by our liver or is in the foods we eat. Taken in large doses, niacin lowers total cholesterol, LDL (bad cholesterol), and triglycerides. It also increases HDL (good cholesterol). You don't need a prescription to buy niacin, but when you take it in large doses—1,500 to 1,600 mg a day—you should be supervised by your doctor or care manager.

## What side effects could I have taking niacin?

Most people who take niacin don't have any problems. Some people do have:

- **Flushing:** You may feel warm and your skin—especially your face and neck—may get red and blotchy. This usually happens 20 minutes after taking the niacin and may last 30 to 60 minutes. Flushing can be uncomfortable, but it won't harm you. You may have less flushing if you take a half or a whole uncoated aspirin pill 30 minutes before taking the niacin. (Coated aspirin and *Tylenol* do not work.) The flushing

usually stops after a few weeks, as your body gets used to the niacin. It may come back if you miss a dose, take the niacin on an empty stomach, or change the brand of niacin you are taking.

- **Itching:** This prickly feeling on your skin will usually go away after a few weeks. Taking a half or a whole uncoated aspirin pill 30 minutes before the niacin may help. (Coated aspirin and *Tylenol* do not work.)
  - If the flushing and itching stop when you have reached the full dose, you can stop taking the aspirin.
- **Rash:** If you develop a rash that is more severe than blotchy flushing, stop taking the niacin. Call your care manager or health care provider immediately.
- **Changes to skin color:** In rare cases, the skin in the armpits or groin gets dark. Tell your health care provider if this happens to you.
- **Heart palpitations:** If you feel your heart beating rapidly (not just a skipped beat), stop taking the niacin. Call your care manager or health care provider immediately.
- **Nausea or diarrhea:** Call your care manager or health care provider if you have these side effects.
- **Liver inflammation:** Although it is rare, niacin can inflame the liver. This will go away when you stop taking the niacin. A simple blood test can check your liver.
- **Gout:** Niacin can increase the amount of uric acid in your blood.

Tell your care provider if you or a family member has had gout.

- **High blood sugar:** Niacin may raise blood sugar, especially if you or family members have diabetes.

Tell your care manager or health care provider if you have: diabetes, gout, peptic ulcers, liver or gallbladder disease, frequent irregular heartbeats, are pregnant or breast feeding.

## Will taking niacin affect my other medications?

- Niacin can cause muscle aches if you are also taking lovastatin (*Mevacor*), simvastatin (*Zocor*), pravastatin (*Pravachol*), atorvastatin (*Lipitor*), or gemfibrozil (*Lopid*). Let your care provider know if you are taking any of these drugs.
- If you are taking warfarin (*Coumadin*), ask your physician if it is alright for you to take niacin too.

## What sort of follow up will I need?

Periodic blood tests will make sure the niacin is lowering your cholesterol without irritating your liver.

## How should I take niacin?

Make sure that you are taking nicotinic acid, not niacinamide. Only nicotinic acid will lower your cholesterol. Also, do not take time-released niacin, unless your doctor or health care provider prescribes it. Tell your care manager or health care provider if you plan to buy your niacin somewhere other than a Kaiser Permanente pharmacy.

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- **Start low and go slow.**

Doing this will allow your body to get used to the niacin slowly. Write down how much niacin you take on a chart (see the chart at the right). Call or email your care manager if you have side effects.

- Take niacin after a meal, when you have food in your stomach.
- Take the niacin with one or two 8-ounce glasses of liquid (water or milk).
- Take a half or a whole, uncoated aspirin pill 30 minutes before taking the niacin dose. This will help with flushing and itching. Do not do this if you have problems with aspirin.
- Do not skip doses. If you miss a dose or a day, flushing can come back.
- Do not take niacin with liquids that may bother your stomach, such as orange juice, alcohol, or hot drinks.

Be sure to tell your doctor if there are reasons why you can't take any medication that's prescribed. Also, tell your care manager if you are having trouble remembering to take your medication.

## What do I need to know about my medications?

Before you leave the clinic, take the time to ask your doctor or member of your health care team about your medications. Ask:

- Why am I taking them?

## Niacin Dosing Chart

Date	Day of Week	Breakfast Dose	Lunch Dose	Dinner Dose	Daily Dose	Tablet Size
		50 mg	50 mg	50 mg	150 mg	100 mg
		100 mg	100 mg	100 mg	300 mg	100 mg
		200 mg	200 mg	200 mg	600 mg	100 mg
		300 mg	300 mg	300 mg	900 mg	100 mg
		400mg	400mg	400mg	1,200 mg	100 mg
		500mg	500mg	500mg	1,500 mg	500 mg

- How often and how long should I take them?
- Are there any special instructions for taking this medication?
- Should I always take medications at mealtime?
- Are there activities that I should avoid while taking any medication?
- What kind of side effects could I have? What symptoms should I look for?
- How can I avoid side effects?

- Set your alarm clock, watch, or computer as a reminder.
- Take medications at the same time every day: before bed, at mealtime, or at the beginning of a TV show you watch every day, such as the evening news.
- Use a pillbox with seven sections, one for each day of the week.
- Record your medication on a wallet card or calendar.
- Can you think of others?

## How can I remember to take my medications?

We all have a hard time adjusting to new routines in our lives. These tips work for others; maybe they can help you too.

- Make a simple chart and post it in an obvious place where you will see it every day, like the bathroom mirror.

### Additional resources

- Connect to our Web site at [kp.org](http://kp.org) to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned. Any trade names listed are for easy identification only.