

How new FDA-approves fish oil drug can help your heart



BROKLYN: The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved use of a fish oil based drug called Vascepa to help prevent cardiovascular events like heart attacks, strokes, and death in at-risk patients. Vascepa, which is produced by the drug manufacturer Amarin

Pharma Inc., is the first drug of its kind to help cut cardiovascular risk in people with already high triglyceride levels, or elevated amounts of fat in the blood. Though the drug was previously approved to treat severe hypertriglyceridemia, or high triglycerides, the FDA

is now expanding its use to lower cardiovascular risk as well. It's designed to be used in conjunction with statins — a commonly used type of lipid lowering drugs — to further reduce one's overall cardiovascular risk. The active ingredient in Vascepa is

icosapentaenoic acid, an omega-3 fatty acid derived from fish oil — but the mechanisms behind Vascepa are not entirely understood. In clinical trials, Vascepa significantly lowered people's cardiovascular risk and triglyceride levels.

As heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States, health experts are optimistic about the treatment option, which could benefit millions of Americans.

"The FDA recognizes there is a need for additional medical treatments for cardiovascular disease," Dr. John Sharretts, the acting deputy director of the division of metabolism and endocrinology products in the FDA's Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, stated in the FDA's announcement. "Today's approval will give patients with elevated triglycerides and other important risk factors, including heart disease, stroke, and diabetes, an adjunctive treatment option that can help decrease their risk of cardiovascular events."

The drug significantly lowers cardiovascular risk and triglyceride levels. The safety and efficacy of Vascepa was evaluated in a clinical study of 8,179 people age 45 and older.

All participants had a history of coronary artery, cerebrovascular, carotid artery, and peripheral artery dis-

ease — or they were at least 50 years old and had diabetes or other risk factors for heart disease. The researchers found that those who took Vascepa were much less likely (by about 25 percent) to experience a cardiovascular event such as a stroke or heart attack.

Additionally, people's triglyceride levels dropped by nearly 18 percent.

There were a couple adverse side effects that took place. Some had a higher risk of atrial fibrillation, or an irregular heartbeat, requiring them to be hospitalized. Others had a higher risk of bleeding events — especially people who were taking medications (like aspirin or warfarin) that increase their risk of bleeding. Most commonly, however, people experienced musculoskeletal pain, swelling of legs and hands, and arthralgia, or joint pain.

The mechanism isn't well understood. Though the mechanism of Vascepa isn't well understood, some health experts suspect it may have to do with the drug's anti-inflammatory effects.

"One mechanism of action may be the anti-inflammatory effects of the icosapentyl (Vascepa). Slowing the progression of cholesterol buildup in the arteries may be another mechanism," Dr. Guy Mintz, the director of cardiovascular health and lipidology of cardiology at Northwell Health's Sandra Atlas Bass

Heart Hospital in New York. It may also have to do with the how omega-3 fatty acids interact with the liver.

"Fish oil has omega-3 fatty acids that are beneficial fats and help reduce liver production of triglycerides," Dr. Sanjiv Patel, a cardiologist at MemorialCare Heart & Vascular Institute at Orange Coast Medical Center in California.

Though Vascepa is fish oil based, it's worth noting that over-the-counter (OTC) fish oil supplements do not share these same benefits. "Drugs like Vascepa and Lovaza have higher concentrations of fish oil as opposed to those commonly available and sold at vitamin stores," Patel said.

Most of the OTC supplements we see in stores have not been clinically proven and offer no known health benefit.

High triglycerides increase risk of stroke, death. It's estimated that about 25 percent of U.S. adults ages 20 and older have high triglycerides — a condition associated with heart disease. Elevated triglyceride levels cause plaque to build up in the arteries, which increases the risk for a heart attack, stroke, and cardiovascular disease.

A healthy triglyceride range is 150 milligrams per deciliter or less, but 25.1 percent of U.S. adults ages 20 and older have 150 mg/dL or more. Typically,

Cannabis-based medicine for epilepsy available on NHS from January

LONDON: People with severe epilepsy will be able to access a cannabis-based medicine on the NHS from early next year after it was fast-tracked for use. NHS England said doctors would be able to prescribe Epidyolex from 6 January. It will be for children from age two, as well as adults, but some campaigners warn it is "too little, too late". Clinical trials have shown the oral solution, which contains cannabidiol (CBD), could reduce the number of seizures



by up to 40% in some children. The medicine will be used to treat two rare, but severe, forms of childhood epilepsy - Lennox Gastaut syndrome and Dravet syndrome - which can cause multiple seizures a day. Two

cannabis medicines approved for NHS Medical cannabis product approved for epilepsy. Epilepsy Action's chief executive Philip Lee welcomed the announcement, saying it "brings much-needed hope and could be life-changing for some". However, he added that Epidyolex was not "a silver bullet" and there was more work to be done to "collect robust high-quality evidence of the effectiveness of other cannabis-based medicines". Medical cannabis campaigner Peter Carroll said it was "too little, too late" as he urged action towards making medicinal cannabis with CBD and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) available for families in need. THC is the psycho-active component of cannabis. Speaking to BBC News, he said: "What's shown to have a transforming effect for children in desperate need is a CBD medicine with a little bit of THC, but those are unlicensed in the UK at the moment." Mr Carroll added: "The law was changed in November 2018 so that specialist doctors could write a prescription for medical cannabis with the CBD and THC, even though they are unlicensed. "Shocking, to our knowledge, not a single prescription for the medicine with those two parts was issued on the NHS since the law was changed." An official NHS review earlier this year found that a "lack of evidence" was holding back cannabis medicines, which specialist doctors have been allowed to prescribe in the UK since the law change last year. Decisions on drug availability are devolved around the UK. It is estimated there are 3,000 people with Dravet and 5,000 with Lennox Gastaut syndrome in England. NHS chief executive Simon Stevens said that thousands of people would now have access to the treatment "which has the potential to make a real difference". —AFP

Motor neurone disease 'linked to cholesterol'

MOSCOW: Scientists say they have discovered a possible underlying cause of the neurological disorder, motor neurone disease (MND). The University of Exeter team says it has found evidence that MND is linked to an imbalance of cholesterol and other fats in cells. It says the research could lead to more accurate diagnosis and new treatments. MND affects around 5,000 people in the UK and causes more than 2,000 deaths a year. What is MND? Motor neurone disease is a group of diseases that affect the nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord that tell your muscles what to do. Also known as ALS, it causes muscle weakness and stiffness. Eventually people with the disease are unable to move, talk, swallow and finally, breathe. There is no cure and the exact causes are unclear - it's been variously linked to genes, exposure to heavy metals and agricultural pollution. What did the researchers find? Scientists at the University of Exeter say they had a "eureka moment" when they realised that 13 genes - which, if altered, can cause the condition - were directly involved in processing cholesterol. They say their theory could help predict the course and severity of the disease in patients and monitor the effect of potential new drugs. The theory is outlined in a paper, published in *Brain: A Journal of Neurology*. —



Eight healthy swaps for everyday food and drinks

MANCHESTER: Sugary cereals, white bread, soda, granola bars, and energy drinks are examples of foods and beverages that many people consume daily.

Although these items may be convenient and tasty, they can harm your health if consumed regularly. Fortunately, healthier substitutes for many of these items are easy to buy or make at home. Here are 8 healthy swaps for everyday food and drinks.

1. Coffee creamer Creamers gives coffee a smooth, sweet taste and comes in a variety of scrumptious flavors, such as pumpkin spice and peppermint mocha.

Yet, it's typically packed with added sugar, often in the form of high-fructose corn syrup — a sweetener linked to several negative health effects like an increased risk of weight gain (1Trusted Source). Plus, many coffee creamers contain artificial colors, preservatives, and thickeners like carrageenan (2Trusted Source).

Substitutes are surprisingly easy to make. For a dairy-free, limited-ingredient creamer alternative that's low in added sugar, use this simple but delicious recipe: One 13.5-ounce (400-ml) can of whole or reduced fat coconut milk 1 ta-

blespoon (15 ml) of maple syrup (or more to taste) 1 teaspoon (5 ml) of vanilla extract

Simply place the ingredients in a bottle or glass mason jar and shake well. Keep it in the refrigerator for up to 1 week or freeze in ice cube trays for long-term storage. If you want to experiment with other flavors, try adding a dash of cinnamon or coconut extract. For a seasonal twist, add a spoonful of pumpkin purée and a pinch of pumpkin pie spice. Shake your creamer well before using it.

2. Soda The negative health effects of soda and other sugary beverages have been confirmed through years of scientific research. For example, soda is associated with an increased risk of diabetes, obesity, fatty liver, and metabolic syndrome — a cluster of symptoms that include high blood pressure and elevated blood sugar (3Trusted Source).

Although many people think that switching to diet soda is the best option, it may also increase your risk of conditions like metabolic syndrome and stroke (4Trusted Source). If you drink soda regularly, consider trying these other fizzy drinks instead:

Infused sparkling water. Toss

slices of your favorite fruits into a bottle of sparkling water for a flavorful, healthy soda substitute.

Sparkling green tea. If you're craving a caffeine fix, sparkling green tea brands like SOUND or Minna contain far less sugar than soda. You can also make your own using this recipe. Kombucha. For a kick of subtle sweetness with the added health benefits of probiotics, grab a low sugar kombucha. Brew Dr.'s Clear Mind and Ginger Turmeric flavors contain only 10 grams of sugar per 14-ounce (415-ml) serving.

Keep in mind that plain water is your best bet for staying hydrated throughout the day.

3. Sugary cereal A bowl of cereal is a staple breakfast for many people. While some options are better than others, most cereals tend to be high in sugar and low in filling macronutrients like protein and fiber. What's more, sugary cereals marketed to children are often packed with high-fructose corn syrup and artificial food dyes like Red 40 — which may be associated with behavioral issues in sensitive children (5Trusted Source, 6Trusted Source).

For a healthier alternative, choose one of the following high

protein, high fiber breakfasts:

Oatmeal. Oatmeal is a natural cereal alternative that's high in fiber and protein. Try to use plain, rolled, or steel-cut oats and nutritious toppings like berries, nuts, unsweetened coconut, and nut butter (7). Chia pudding. For a slightly sweet but fiber-packed meal that's kid-friendly, try this delicious, high protein chia pudding recipe. Yogurt parfait. Layer whole or 2% plain Greek yogurt with fresh berries, unsweetened coconut, and crushed almonds for a filling breakfast option.

What's more, homemade muesli or granola recipes are easy to find online.

4. Granola bars Granola bars are a go-to snack choice for many people. Yet, most popular granola bars are filled with added sugars and other sweet ingredients, such as chocolate chips or candy coatings. All the same, several brands manufacture healthy choices. Thunderbird, RX, Purely Elizabeth, and Autumn's Gold granola bars are a few examples that use whole foods and pack plenty of protein and fiber. Additionally, you can try out a homemade granola bar recipe, such as this one. It's low in added sugar. —AFP

TV repeats and old songs that help people with dementia

BERLIN: TV repeats and familiar festive songs can help people with dementia by stimulating memories and keeping the brain active.

Christmas can be an unsettling time for those with dementia. But experts say singing along to songs like White Christmas can stimulate "emotional memories". And while people with dementia might not remember the exact details of *It's A Wonderful Life*, they may recall how they felt at the end of the film.

NHS England's national clinical director for dementia, Prof Alistair Burns, says Christmas can sometimes be strange or confusing for those living with dementia.

Lots of social engagements and a steady stream of house guests coming through the door have the potential to be unsettling. But he says watching familiar films or singing along to favourite songs can help make the festive season easier to navigate. "People with dementia might find it hard to follow convoluted conversations amid the chaos and noise of Christmas and can end



up feeling excluded.

"Gathering the family round to watch a much-loved classic film, thumb through an old photo album, play a family game or even sing along to a favourite carol can bring people together and help everybody feel part of the fun." Experts say it is the emotional details of a favourite film or song that remain lodged in our minds. Rekindling them improves a feeling of connectedness with other people which is important for both people with dementia and their friends and families.

NHS England has this advice on how to make Christmas easier to cope with for someone with dementia. Put decorations up gradually so it doesn't come as too much of a change. Help people who are frail or living with dementia feel included by getting them to assist with hanging a bauble or other simple tasks. Spread out family



visits to keep things low key and familiar. Don't overload on food - a full plate can be difficult to tackle for somebody with dementia who might have eating difficulties. Be flexible with planning - be prepared to change plans if something isn't working.

Prof Burns is also urging people to look out for signs of dementia among older family members and friends over Christmas. These might include emotional changes and forgetfulness which can sometimes be the first indication that someone has dementia. Kathryn Smith, chief operating officer at the Alzheimer's Society, says Christmas can pose difficulties for the 850,000 people living with dementia in the UK, but there are strategies that can help.

"Whether it's an old song they used to enjoy or a classic Christmas film, reminiscing can be beneficial to someone with dementia - it can help to maintain their self-esteem, confidence and sense of self, as well as improve social interactions with others. "However, every person with dementia is different, so it's important to listen and accommodate your loved one's unique needs and wishes." —Reuters

Vegans 'need to be aware of B12 deficiency risk'

LONDON: Experts are warning that people eating a vegan diet need to make sure they get enough B12 - because the risk of deficiency is "not a myth".

They were speaking ahead of 'Veganuary', when increasing numbers turn to a vegan diet each January. The diet is generally high in fibre and low in cholesterol, but some nutrients are harder to get enough of - including B12.

The Vegan Society said it was available in supplements or fortified foods. Fake-meat and fries: The rise of vegan fast food. Being vegan when you're on a budget. Will going vegan make you healthier? Adults need around 1.5 micrograms of B12 a day.

It is found in meat, fish, eggs and dairy products, but not in fruits, vegetables or grains - so those eating a vegan diet are advised to eat fortified foods, like cereals, or take supplements.

B12 deficiency, which can lead to nerve damage, tends to take three or four years to cause symptoms - usually first appearing as pins and needles in the hands or feet. 'Easily avoided' Tim Key, professor of epidemiology and

deputy director of the Cancer Epidemiology unit at Oxford University, said: "You're not going to get B12 deficiency in Veganuary." But Prof Key, a vegan for many years who takes B12 supplements himself, added: "If people become vegan because of that, and don't ever bother to read up about what you need to eat as a vegan, I would be worried they won't know about B12."

Suggestions online or on social media that vegans do not need extra B12 are not based on evidence, scientists say.

Tom Sanders, emeritus professor of nutrition and dietetics at King's College London, said: "Of all the micronutrients, B12 is the one we're most concerned about. I'm concerned many people think B12 deficiency is a myth."

He highlighted the case of a breastfeeding mother who had B12 deficiency, and whose child developed neuropathy, leading to long-term damage. "It's something that can be easily avoided, and what concerns me is that many new people becoming vegan are unaware of the need to combine sources of plant proteins. And they're

not aware of the need to ensure they have adequate levels of B12." Nutritional planning 'essential' There is limited

data on the health effects of a vegan diet - with one UK and one US study covering around 10,000 people.

So far, the evidence suggests people who are vegan are less likely to be overweight, and at less risk. —Reuters

