Do statins make you fat? Or is it the other way around?

By ACSH Staff — July 8, 2014

Of all the misconceptions we regularly deal with at ACSH, the mangling of cause and effect is way up there. Between the generally poor state of American scientific acumen and groups that have a vested interest in obfuscating the truth for their own purposes, we will never run out of topics.

The latest example is an article subtlety titled Different Time Trends of Caloric and Fat Intake Between Statin Users and Nonusers Among US Adults: Gluttony in the Time of Statins?

Upon first glance, it would appear that the authors, whose paper appeared in the current edition of JAMA Internal Medicine, are suggesting that the use of statins may make you fatter.

It would seem that there is something to this, but what, if any, conclusions can be drawn?

Lead author Takehiro Sugiyama and colleagues studied the relationship between caloric and fat intake in both users and nonusers of statins among US adults.

They examined a group of almost 28 thousand adults age 20+ from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey database during the years 1999-2010, searching for dietary difference and weight gain between the two groups. The parameters that were measured were calorie and fat consumption as well as BMI.

The results were intriguing:

- In year one (1999-2000) statin users consumed significantly fewer calories than non-users
- This effect faded with time, and by 2005, there was no difference between the groups.
- But by 2009-2010, the statin group actually consumed 9.6 percent more calories than they did in 1999-2000.
- During this same eleven year period there was no change in consumption in the non-statin group.
- The same trend held true for consumption of fat.

The authors concluded Caloric and fat intake have increased among statin users over time, which
was not true for nonusers. The increase in BMI was faster for statin users than for nonusers. Efforts aimed at dietary control among statin users may be becoming less intensive. The importance of dietary composition may need to be reemphasized for statin users.

So, what is going on here? Are the statins biochemically inducing cravings for calories and fat?

ACSH’s Dr. Josh Bloom says, I have little doubt that the anti-pharmaceutical crowd will spin this so that the drugs themselves will be blamed. But I don’t see it that way at all.

He continues, This is, in many ways, the same story as the interpretation of a study that concluded that diet soda consumption caused people to gain weight. Anti-artificial sweetener zealots, with the aid of some of the worst headlines the press has ever produced, trumpeted the fact that drinking diet soda will make you obese. As we pointed out [2] this past January, this was nonsense. Once the initial weight of the people in the study was taken into account, this trend went away. It became clear that they had it backwards: Obese people consume more diet soda, not the other way around.

ACSH’s Dr Gil Ross has a similar take on this: It is obvious that statins do not in themselves cause weight gain. Rather, they give people a false sense of security that they are protected from heart disease, and this wishful thinking allows them to eat more (and with less regard for sound nutrition). The fact that this trend changed gradually with time over an eleven-year period strongly supports this conclusion. The bottom line: statins are marvelous drugs, but they should not be used as an excuse to eat whatever you want. This behavior will ultimately be self-defeating.

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