ACC/AHA/NHLBI Clinical Advisory on the Use and Safety of Statins

Writing Committee Members:
Richard C. Pasternak, MD, FACC, FAHA; Sidney C. Smith, Jr, MD, FACC, FAHA; C. Noel Bairey-Merz, MD, FACC; Scott M. Grundy, MD, PhD, FAHA; James I. Cleeman, MD; Claude Lenfant, MD, FACC (Hon), FAHA

Preamble
The voluntary withdrawal of cerivastatin (Baycol) from the U.S. market on August 8, 2001, by the manufacturer, in agreement with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), has prompted concern on the part of physicians and patients regarding the safety of the cholesterol-lowering class of drugs called HMG CoA reductase inhibitors, more commonly known as “statins.” This American College of Cardiology/American Heart Association/National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute (ACC/AHA/NHLBI) Clinical Advisory is intended to summarize for professionals the current understanding of statin use, focused on myopathy, and to provide updated recommendations for the appropriate use of statins, including cautions, contraindications, and safety monitoring for statin therapy. Its purpose is not to discourage the appropriate use of statins, which have life-saving potential in properly selected patients, particularly those with established coronary heart disease (CHD) and others at high risk for developing CHD. Included are recent myopathy information compiled by the FDA, information from clinical trials, and summaries from the recently released report of the Adult Treatment Panel III (ATP III) of the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP).1

Introduction
In the literature, the general terminology used to describe muscle toxicity is inconsistent. Therefore, for the purpose of this document, the following terms are used as defined here: Myopathy—on a patient’s risk status. The Adult Treatment Panel III therapy and establish goals for LDL cholesterol that depend on the recently released report of the Adult Treatment Panel III (NCEP).1

The NCEP has published updated guidelines for treatment of high blood cholesterol (Adult Treatment Panel III report).1 These guidelines are endorsed by the ACC and AHA. They identify elevated LDL cholesterol as the primary target of therapy and establish goals for LDL cholesterol that depend on a patient’s risk status. The Adult Treatment Panel III report was able to apply rigorous clinical trial evidence to

This document was approved by the American College of Cardiology Foundation Board of Trustees in May 2002, by the American Heart Association Science Advisory and Coordinating Committee in May 2002, and by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute in May 2002.

When citing this document, the American College of Cardiology, American Heart Association, and National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute would appreciate the following citation format: Pasternak RC, Smith SC Jr, Bairey-Merz CN, Grundy SM, Cleeman JI, Lenfant C. ACC/AHA/NHLBI Advisory on the Use and Safety of Statins. (Circulation. 2002;106:1024–1028.)

This Advisory has been co-published in the August 7, 2002, issue of the Journal of the American College of Cardiology.

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(Circulation 2002;106:1024-1028.)

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Circulation is available at http://www.circulationaha.org

DOI: 01.CIR.0000032466.44170.44

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identify additional high-risk individuals for treatment, greatly expanding the number of patients who are candidates for these drugs. These include patients with established CHD, other forms of atherosclerotic disease, diabetes mellitus, multiple risk factors imparting high risk, and severe hypercholesterolemia. In many patients, relatively high doses of statins will be required to achieve LDL cholesterol goals of therapy. In addition, for patients with high triglycerides, non–high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol (LDL + VLDL [very low density lipoprotein] cholesterol) has been identified as a secondary target of therapy. To achieve the non–HDL cholesterol goal, many patients will require statin therapy as well. This broad expansion of statin use will require that increased attention be given to every aspect of statin therapy (i.e., efficacy, safety, and cost-effectiveness).

In view of the demonstrated safety of these agents, both medical professionals and the public were surprised by the recent withdrawal of a relatively new statin, cerivastatin (Baycol), from the market. Cerivastatin was first approved for use in the U.S. in 1997. In August 2001, the manufacturer, Bayer AG, announced the withdrawal of all dosages of its cholesterol-lowering drug with the brand names Baycol/Lipobay (cerivastatin) because of increasingly frequent reports of serious myopathy, including severe and life-threatening rhabdomyolysis. Rhabdomyolysis was reported most frequently when cerivastatin was used at higher doses and, particularly, in combination with another lipid-lowering drug, gemfibrozil (LOPID and generics). At the time of withdrawal, the FDA had received reports of 31 U.S. deaths due to severe rhabdomyolysis associated with the use of cerivastatin, 12 of which involved concomitant gemfibrozil use (http://www.fda.gov/cder/drug/infopage/baycol/). Subsequently, the Wall Street Journal (1/21/02, pg. A10) reported that Bayer AG had indicated that as many as 100 deaths have been linked to Baycol. The FDA reports that the rate of fatal rhabdomyolysis is 16 to 80 times more frequent for cerivastatin as compared to any other statin.10

Incidence of Adverse Events

The statins are well tolerated by most persons. Elevated hepatic transaminases generally occur in 0.5% to 2.0% of cases and are dose-dependent.11,12 Whether transaminase elevation with statin therapy constitutes true hepatotoxicity has not been determined. Progression to liver failure specifically due to statins is exceedingly rare if it ever occurs.13 Reversal of transaminase elevation is frequently noted with a reduction in dose, and elevations do not often recur with re-challenge or selection of another statin.14,15 Myositis is most likely to occur in persons who have complex medical problems and/or who are taking multiple medications. It may rarely occur with statin monotherapy, but it occurs more frequently when statins are used in combination with a variety of medications, including cyclosporine, fibrates, macrolide antibiotics, certain antifungal drugs, and niacin.19–21 Some of the drug to drug interactions involve specific interactions with the cytochrome P-450 drug-metabolizing system, especially those involving the 3A4 isozyme.22,23 The combination of statins with a fibrate is attractive for persons who have both high serum cholesterol and high triglycerides or for those who continue to have elevated triglycerides after reaching their LDL-cholesterol target on statin therapy. However, there may be a concern about an increased danger of developing myopathy with this combination. In the past, this combination was thought to be “contraindicated” because of the potential danger of myopathy. More recently, it has been used increasingly with apparent safety in the majority of persons. This combination is now presented by the ATP III report as an option, with careful monitoring, for some forms of dyslipidemia.

The FDA report comparing the rate of fatal rhabdomyolysis among different statins is of considerable importance.10 The FDA performed a detailed review of all reports of fatal rhabdomyolysis in their Adverse Event Reporting System and obtained the number of prescriptions dispensed since marketing of each statin began in the U.S. Fatal rhabdomyolysis was extremely rare (less than 1 death/million prescriptions). As previously noted, the rate of fatal rhabdomyolysis for cerivastatin was far greater than that for other statins (16 to 80 times higher). Even after excluding cases in which cerivastatin was administered with gemfibrozil, the reporting rate for fatal rhabdomyolysis with cerivastatin monotherapy (1.9 deaths per million prescriptions) was 10 to 50 times higher than for other statins. The FDA report also noted that more than 60% of the fatal cases with cerivastatin were associated with use of the highest dose (0.8 mg daily). The FDA notes that the data are reporting rates, not incidence rates. Thus, statistically “rigorous comparisons between drugs . . . are not recommended”.10 Nevertheless, review of these data strongly sug-
gests that there were no clinically important differences in the rate of fatal complications among the five statins now available in the U.S. (atorvastatin, fluvastatin, lovastatin, pravastatin, and simvastatin). Clinicians should consider the rates of severe myopathy as equivalent among all of these approved statins.

The following are summary comments reflecting current experience with these issues:

- Statin therapy appears to carry a small but definite risk of myopathy when used alone. According to several large clinical trial databases, the incidence of severe myopathy is reported to be 0.08% with lovastatin and simvastatin.\(^3\) (probably similar) risk of myopathy.

- Of the nearly 600 persons who have participated in controlled clinical trials of a statin and fibrate combination, 1% have experienced a CK greater than 3 times the ULN without muscle symptoms, and 1% have been withdrawn from therapy because of muscle discomfort.\(^2\) None of these findings were considered serious by the trial investigators. No cases of rhabdomyolysis or myoglobinuria have been encountered in these clinical trials. The experience in these trials is predominantly with lovastatin and gemfibrozil, but it is reasonable to believe that the experiences with other statin-fibrate combinations would be similar.

**Mechanism of Myopathy**

Because it occurs so rarely, little is known about the fundamental mechanisms of statin-associated myopathy. It has been suggested that statins lead to inhibited synthesis of compounds arising from the synthetic pathway of cholesterol. In theory, this could lead to ubiquinone (an essential intracellular energy component) deficiency in muscle cell mitochondria, disturbing normal cellular respiration and causing adverse effects including rhabdomyolysis. Despite in-vitro support for this concept, a human study of six months of simvastatin treatment (20 mg per day) on skeletal muscle demonstrated that the muscle high-energy phosphate and ubiquinone concentrations assayed after simvastatin treatment were similar to those observed at baseline and did not differ from values in control subjects.\(^1\) No clinical study has yet provided support for the hypothesis of diminished isoprenoid synthesis or energy generation in muscle cells during statin therapy. Some have proposed that statin interaction with the cytochrome P-450 hepatic enzyme system might be related to myopathy.\(^22\) Support for this concept comes, in part, from the known enhanced toxicity when statins are administered with agents sharing metabolism by the same cytochrome isofoms. Finally, it has been shown that exercise in combination with lovastatin produces greater creatine kinase elevations than those produced by exercise alone, suggesting that statins can exacerbate exercise-induced skeletal muscle injury.\(^35\)

**Diagnosis**

Routine laboratory monitoring of CK is of little value in the absence of clinical signs or symptoms. Therefore, all persons beginning to receive statins should be instructed to report muscle discomfort or weakness or brown urine immediately, which should then prompt a CK measurement.

**Management**

**Baseline Measurements**

Before initiating statin therapy, baseline measurements, including a lipid and lipoprotein profile, that will be used to follow the drug’s efficacy and safety should be documented. Current labeling for all statins requires baseline measurements of liver function, including alanine transferase and aspartate transferase, although this is not agreed on by many liver experts and will likely undergo review in the future. Modest transaminase elevations (less than 3 times the ULN) are not thought to represent a contraindication to initiating, continuing, or advancing statin therapy, as long as patients are carefully monitored. Many experts also favor, and the ATP III report recommends, baseline CK measurement, reasoning that asymptomatic CK elevations are common and pre-treatment knowledge of this condition can aid in later clinical decision making.

**Monitoring for Adverse Reactions and Adjusting Therapy**

Once therapy has been initiated, symptoms may appear at any time. If myositis is present or strongly suspected, the statin should be discontinued immediately. Several key points should be kept in mind.

- Obtain a CK measurement if the patient reports suggestive muscle symptoms, and compare to CK blood level prior to beginning therapy. Because hypothyroidism predisposes to myopathy, a thyroid-stimulating hormone level should also be obtained in any patient with muscle symptoms.

- If the patient experiences muscle soreness, tenderness, or pain, with or without CK elevations, rule out common causes such as exercise or strenuous work. Advise moderation in activity for persons who experience these symptoms during combination therapy.

- Discontinue statin therapy (or statin and niacin or fibrate if the patient is on combination therapy) if a CK greater than 10 times the ULN is encountered in a patient with muscle soreness, tenderness, or pain.

- If the patient experiences muscle soreness, tenderness, or pain with either no CK elevation or a moderate elevation (3 to 10 times the ULN), follow the patient’s symptoms and CK levels weekly until there is no longer medical concern or symptoms worsen to the situation described previously (at which point therapy should be discontinued). For patients who develop muscle discomfort and/or weakness and who also have progressive elevations of CK on serial measurements, either a reduction of statin dose or a temporary discontinuation may be prudent. A decision can then be made whether or when to reinstitute statin therapy.
Asymptomatic Patients With CK Elevation

Prior to the withdrawal of cerivastatin, the ATP III report did not recommend routine ongoing monitoring of CK in asymptomatic patients. If a physician chooses to obtain CK values in asymptomatic patients, particularly those on combination therapy, and CKs are elevated to more than 10 times the ULN, strong consideration should be given to stopping therapy. Following discontinuation, wait for symptoms to resolve and CK levels to return to normal before reinitiating therapy with either drug and use a lower dose of the drug(s) if possible.

Some asymptomatic patients will have moderate (i.e., between 3 and 10 times the ULN) CK elevations at baseline, during treatment, or after a drug holiday. Such patients can usually be treated with a statin without harm. However, particularly careful monitoring of symptoms and more frequent CK measurements are indicated.

Prevention

Increased Risk States for Statin-Associated Myopathy

Prevention of statin-associated myopathy can best be accomplished by attention to those factors that might increase the risk for such myopathy:

- Advanced age (especially more than 80 years) in patients (women more than men)
- Small body frame and frailty
- Multisystem disease (e.g., chronic renal insufficiency, especially due to diabetes)
- Multiple medications
- Perioperative periods
- Specific concomitant medications or consumption as listed below (check specific statin package insert for warnings)
  - Fibrates (especially gemfibrozil, but other fibrates too)
  - Nicotinic acid (rarely)
  - Cyclosporine
  - Azole antifungals
  - Itraconazole and ketoconazole
  - Macrolide antibiotics
  - Erythromycin and clarithromycin
  - HIV protease inhibitors
  - Nefazodone (antidepressant)
  - Verapamil
  - Amiodarone
  - Large quantities of grapefruit juice (usually more than 1 quart per day)
  - Alcohol abuse (independently predisposes to myopathy)

Clinical Precautions

Most myopathy associated with statins appears to occur in patients who are at risk for the condition. For this reason, physicians should be aware of several caveats when prescribing statin therapy. Myopathy is more likely to occur at higher statin doses than at lower doses. For this reason, doses should not exceed those required to attain the ATP III goal of therapy. As a rule, statin therapy should be employed more cautiously in older persons, particularly older thin or frail women, but it is not contraindicated in these or other high-risk patients. Among older persons, those with multisystem disease apparently are at higher risk. Patients with diabetes combined with chronic renal failure also appear to be at higher risk for myopathy—such patients should be monitored carefully. In several instances, myopathy has developed when patients were continued on statin therapy during hospitalization for major surgery. Therefore, it probably is prudent to withhold statins during such periods.

Particular attention should be given to drug interactions when employing statin therapy. Although the combination of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Summary of HMG CoA Reductase Inhibitors</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Available drugs</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lovastatin, pravastatin, simvastatin, fluvastatin, atorvastatin</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Lipid/lipoprotein effects</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LDL cholesterol ↓ 18–55 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HDL cholesterol ↑ 5–15 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Triglycerides ↓ 7–30 percent</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Major use</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>To lower LDL-cholesterol</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Contraindications</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Absolute</td>
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<tr>
<td>Active or chronic liver disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concomitant use of cyclosporine, gemfibrozil, or niacin, macrolide antibiotics, various anti-fungal agents, and cytochrome P-450 inhibitors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Efficacy</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduce risk for CHD and stroke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Safety</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Side effects minimal in clinical trials</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Usual starting dose</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lovastatin - 20 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pravastatin - 20 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simvastatin - 20 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fluvastatin - 20 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atorvastatin - 10 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Maximum FDA-approved dose</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lovastatin - 80 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pravastatin - 80 mg</td>
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<td>Simvastatin - 80 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fluvastatin - 80 mg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Atorvastatin - 80 mg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Available preparations</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lovastatin - 10, 20, 40 mg tablets</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pravastatin - 10, 20, 40, 80 mg tablets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simvastatin - 5, 10, 20, 40, 80 mg tablets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluvastatin - 20, 40, 80 (xl) mg tablets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atorvastatin - 10, 20, 40, 80 mg tablets</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2. Monitoring Parameters and Follow-Up Schedule</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Monitoring Parameters</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Follow-Up Schedule</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Statins</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Headache, dyspepsia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate symptoms initially, 6 to 8 weeks after starting therapy, then at each follow-up visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscle soreness, tenderness, or pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluate muscle symptoms and CK before starting therapy. Evaluate muscle symptoms 6 to 12 weeks after starting therapy and at each follow-up visit. Obtain a CK measurement when persons have muscle soreness, tenderness, or pain.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALT, AST</td>
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<tr>
<td>Evaluate ALT/AST initially, approximately 12 weeks after starting therapy, then annually or more frequently if indicated.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

ALT = alanine transferase; and AST = aspartate transferase.
stain plus fibrate is accompanied by an increased danger of myopathy, the use of moderate stain doses combined with fibrate appears to have a relatively low incidence of myopathy, especially when used in persons without multisystem disease or multiple medications. The combination of stain plus nicotinic acid seemingly carries a lower risk for myopathy than does stain plus fibrate. Finally, physicians should be aware of the dangers of interactions of stains with the other drugs previously listed. These combinations should also be used with caution or avoided altogether. Furthermore, it is important for clinicians prescribing stains to make sure that their patients are aware of these potential drug interactions, because in current practice, a patient may receive prescriptions from many different caregivers.

**Summary**

Statin therapy holds great promise for reducing the incidence of major coronary events, coronary procedures, and stroke in high-risk patients. At present, this potential has not been fully realized, because many patients at heightened risk are not being treated with these drugs. There is a well documented under-use of stains in clinical practice. Stains have proven to be extremely safe in the vast majority of patients receiving them. Few significant side effects were observed in clinical trials, and post-marketing reports of adverse events have been very limited when considered in comparison to the very large number of persons safely receiving these drugs. Even so, these drugs are not entirely free of side effects, and as for all drugs, they should be used appropriately and judiciously. This advisory encourages the appropriate use of stains while pointing out the possibility of side effects in certain patients. If stains are used with appropriate caution in these selected patients, the likelihood of developing clinically important myopathy should be substantially reduced. (See Tables 1 and 2.)

**References**

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Circulation. 2002;106:1024-1028
doi: 10.1161/01.CIR.0000032466.44170.44

Circulation is published by the American Heart Association, 7272 Greenville Avenue, Dallas, TX 75231
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Print ISSN: 0009-7322. Online ISSN: 1524-4539

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