

# Docs urge cholesterol medicine for kids

Group says some drugs safe enough for children at risk of eventual heart disease.

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Chicago — For the first time, an influential doctors group is recommending that some children as young as 8 be given cholesterol-fighting drugs to ward off future heart problems.

It is the strongest guidance ever given by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which is releasing its new guidelines today. The academy also recommends low-fat milk for 1-year-olds and wider cholesterol testing.

Dr. Stephen Daniels, of the academy's nutrition committee, said the new advice is based on mounting evidence showing that damage leading to heart disease, the nation's leading killer, begins early in life.

It also stems from recent research showing that cholesterol-fighting drugs are generally safe for children, Daniels said.

"If we are more aggressive about this in childhood, I think we can have an impact on what happens later in life ... and avoid some of these heart attacks and strokes in adulthood," Daniels said. He has worked as a consultant to Abbott Laboratories and Merck & Co., but not on matters involving their cholesterol drugs.

Drug treatment would generally be targeted for kids at least 8 years old who have too much LDL, the "bad" cholesterol, along with other risky conditions, including obesity and high blood pressure.

For overweight children with too little HDL, the "good" cholesterol, the first course of action should be weight loss, more physical activity and nutritional counseling, the academy says.

Pediatricians should routinely check the cholesterol of children with a family history of inherited cholesterol disease or with parents or grandparents who developed heart disease at an early age, the recommendations say. Screening also is advised for kids whose family history isn't known and those who are overweight, obese or have other heart disease risk factors.

Screening is recommended sometime after age 2 but no later than age 10, at routine checkups.

The academy's earlier advice said cholesterol drugs should only be considered in children older than 10 after they failed to lose weight.

Previous cholesterol screening recommendations also were less specific and did not include targeted ages for beginning testing.

Because obesity is a risk factor for heart disease and often is accompanied by cholesterol problems, the academy recommendations say low-fat milk is appropriate for 1-year-olds "for whom overweight or obesity is a concern."

Daniels, a pediatrician in the Denver area, agreed that could include virtually all children. But he said doctors may choose to offer the new milk advice only to 1-year-olds who are already overweight or have a family history of heart problems.

The academy has long recommended against reduced-fat milk for children up to age 2 because saturated fats are needed for brain development.

"But now we have the obesity epidemic and people are thinking maybe this isn't such a good idea," said Dr. Frank Greer of the University of Wisconsin, co-author of the guidelines report, which appears in the July edition of *Pediatrics*, the group's medical journal.

Very young children are increasingly getting fats from sources other than milk and Greer said the updated advice is based on recent research showing no harm from reduced-fat milk in these youngsters.

With one-third of U.S. children overweight and about 17 percent obese, the new recommendations are important, said Dr. Jennifer Li, a Duke University children's heart specialist.

"We need to do something to stem the tide of childhood obesity," Li said.

Li said that 15 years ago most of her patients with cholesterol problems had an inherited form of cholesterol disease not connected to obesity.

"But now they're really outnumbered" by overweight kids with cholesterol problems and high blood pressure, she said.

Dr. Elena Fuentes-Afflick, a pediatrics professor at the University of California at San Francisco, also praised the new advice but said some parents think their kids will outgrow obesity and cholesterol problems, and might not take it seriously.

"It's hard for people to really understand" that those problems in childhood can lead to serious health consequences in adulthood, Fuentes-Afflick said.

## THE ADVICE

Which children should have cholesterol tests?

Between the ages of 2 and 10, children with a family history of inherited cholesterol disease or with parents or grandparents who got heart disease at an early age. Screening also is advised for kids who are overweight or have other heart disease risk factors and those whose family history isn't known.

Which children should doctors consider putting on cholesterol-lowering drugs?

Children who are at least 8 years old who have too much LDL, the "bad" cholesterol, along with other risky conditions, including obesity and high blood pressure.

What about other overweight children?

Overweight children with too little HDL, the "good" cholesterol, should focus on improving their [diet](#) and boosting physical activity levels.

What other recommendations did the academy make?

Instead of whole milk, low-fat milk — with 1 percent or 2 percent milk fat — is preferable for 1-year-olds who are overweight or whose family has a history of obesity or heart disease.

Source: American Academy of Pediatrics

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