Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease Risk and Evidence-based Management of Cholesterol

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Abstract

An elevated level of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol is directly associated with development of atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, which may present as coronary heart disease, stroke, and peripheral arterial disease. The new cholesterol management guidelines from the American College of Cardiology and the American Heart Association aim to address a comprehensive approach to prevent and reduce the risk of atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease. The new guidelines recommend initiation of heart healthy lifestyle modifications and 3-hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl coenzyme-A reductase inhibitor ("statin") therapy in individuals who are at a high risk for atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease. It is estimated that these guidelines could result in "statin" therapy for one in every three adults in the United States. This article presents a review of the current cholesterol management guidelines, recommendations from relevant randomized controlled trials and meta-analyses obtained from the searches in Medline/PubMed and Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, and publications from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Service, and the United States Preventive Services Task Force.

Keywords: Atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, cholesterol management, statin

Introduction

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States. High cholesterol increases the risk of developing cardiovascular (CV) disease.[1] About 45% of Medicare beneficiaries have high cholesterol, making it the second most common condition among all of the out-patient medical office encounters.[2] An elevated level of low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) is directly associated with development of atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease (ASCVD), which includes coronary heart disease (CHD), stroke, and peripheral arterial disease (PAD).[3] Although approximately 71 million adults in the United States have elevated LDL-C, less than half receive treatment,

Access this article online	
Quick Response Code:	**Website:** www.najms.org
	DOI: 10.4103/1947-2714.132916

and only a third have LDL-C in the desired target level.[4]

Old concept

In the United States, cholesterol screening has been recommended for men of ages 35 and older, for women of ages 45 and older, and for men and women of ages 20 and older if they are at increased risk for CHD.[5] The practice of cholesterol management is based on the recommendations to treat elevated LDL-C beyond a specific goal in individuals who fall into a specific cardiovascular disease (CVD) risk category as per the guidelines of the National Cholesterol Education Program (NCEP) Expert Panel on Detection, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Cholesterol in Adults, also known as Adult Treatment Panel-III (ATP-III).[6]

New concept

The goals of the new cholesterol management guidelines include the prevention of ASCVD, improving the management of individuals who have ASCVD, and promoting optimal ASCVD care.[3] An expert panel

was appointed for detection, evaluation, and treatment of cholesterol in adults (Adult Treatment Panel-IV)[7] in order to develop evidence-based guidelines, which follow the practice guidelines and the evidence-based standards set by the Institute of Medicine report.[8] The recommendations made by the expert panel aim to assess CV risk, reduce CV risk by modification of lifestyle factors, guide maintenance of an ideal body mass index, and manage blood cholesterol. After an extensive review of the data from randomized controlled trials (RCTs), systematic reviews and meta-analyses of RCTs, the panel developed these cholesterol management guidelines in order to reduce risk of ASCVD, not just the prevention of CVD alone as proposed by the ATP-III.[9] The RCTs have shown that the increased ASCVD risk is not only associated with elevated LDL-C levels, but also factors such as gender, race, tobacco smoking, hypertension, and diabetes mellitus should be included in the comprehensive management of cholesterol.[10] The guidelines recommend beginning cholesterol screening in all adults who are 21 years or older.[3] The panel did not find evidence to support the titration of cholesterol lowering drug therapy to achieve target LDL-C or nonhigh-density lipoprotein cholesterol (non-HDL-C) levels.[3,6] Lifestyle modifications are the critical components of ASCVD risk reduction.[3] These include adherence to a heart healthy diet, regular exercise, maintenance of a healthy weight, and avoidance of tobacco products.[11] The panel also found that 3-hydroxy-3-methylglutaryl coenzyme A (HMG-CoA) reductase inhibitors ("statins") are the only cholesterol lowering drugs that have shown ASCVD risk reduction,[12] and each 39 mg/dL reduction in LDL-C by a statin reduces the risk of ASCVD by 20%.[3] In order to reduce the risk of ASCVD an appropriate intensity of statin therapy should be used [Table 1]. As far as the nonstatin cholesterol-lowering drugs are concerned, the panel found no evidence to support the use of this category of drugs either as monotherapy or in combination with a statin.[13,14] The panel also identified the high-risk groups that do not benefit from statin therapy.[3]

New Management Guidelines

The benefits of lipid lowering drug "statin" therapy

Table 1: Intensity of statin therapy

1. High-intensity	Average LDL-C level reduction by > 50% on daily statin therapy
2. Moderate-intensity	Average LDL-C level reduction by 30% to < 50% on daily statin therapy
3. Low-intensity	Average LDL-C level reduction by < 30% on daily statin therapy

LDL-C = Low-Density Lipoprotein Cholesterol
Information from reference 3

outweigh the risks in the four groups of patients who are at increased risk of ASCVD [Table 2, Figure 1].[15-38] In patients with LDL-C greater than 190 mg/dL and/or triglyceride greater than 500 mg/dL it is necessary to investigate and correct the common causes of secondary hyperlipidemia [Table 3] before initiation of statin therapy.[48] The panel does not support "statin" therapy in patients who are older than 75 years without clinical ASCVD,[49,50] who are on hemodialysis,[19] and who suffer from New York Heart Association class II, III, or IV heart failure.[51] The role of additional factors, such as biomarkers and noninvasive tests, [Table 4] is limited to patients who either do not qualify in the four statin benefit groups, or in whom it is unclear to make a decision of initiating statin therapy.[3]

ASCVD Risk Assessment

A comprehensive tool, known as Pooled Cohort Risk Assessment Equation (PCRAE),[10] for the prediction and assessment of 10-year risk of an ASCVD event has been developed, which contrasts with the conventional risk

Table 2: Key recommendations: Four statin benefit groups

NHLBI Grading the Strength of Recommendations

Clinical recommendation	Evidence rating	References
1. Individuals with clinical ASCVD HIST is indicated	A	[3,6,8,11,12,14-27]
2. Individuals with primary elevations of LDL–C ≥190 mg/dL HIST is indicated	B	[3,6,21,27-32]
3. Individuals aged between 40 and 75 years with diabetes and LDL-C between 70 and 189 mg/dL MIST is indicated	A	[3,21,28,29,33-37]
4. Individuals without clinical ASCVD or diabetes who are aged between 40 and 75 years with LDL-C between 70 and 189 mg/dL and an estimated 10-year ASCVD risk of 7.5% or higher M-HIST is indicated	A	[3,27,29,30,32,38-47]

NHLBI = National Heart Lung and Blood Institute; ASCVD = Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease; LDL-C = Low-Density Lipoprotein Cholesterol; HIST = High-intensity statin therapy; MIST = Moderate-intensity statin therapy; M-HIST = Moderate to high-intensity statin therapy.

A = There is high certainty based on evidence that the net benefit is substantial; B = There is moderate certainty based on evidence that the net benefit is moderate to substantial, or there is high certainty that the net benefit is moderate; C = There is at least moderate certainty based on evidence that there is a small net benefit; D = There is at least moderate certainty based on evidence that it has no net benefit or that risks/harms outweigh benefits. For information about the NHLBI Grading the Strength of Recommendations, go to http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov. Information from reference 3
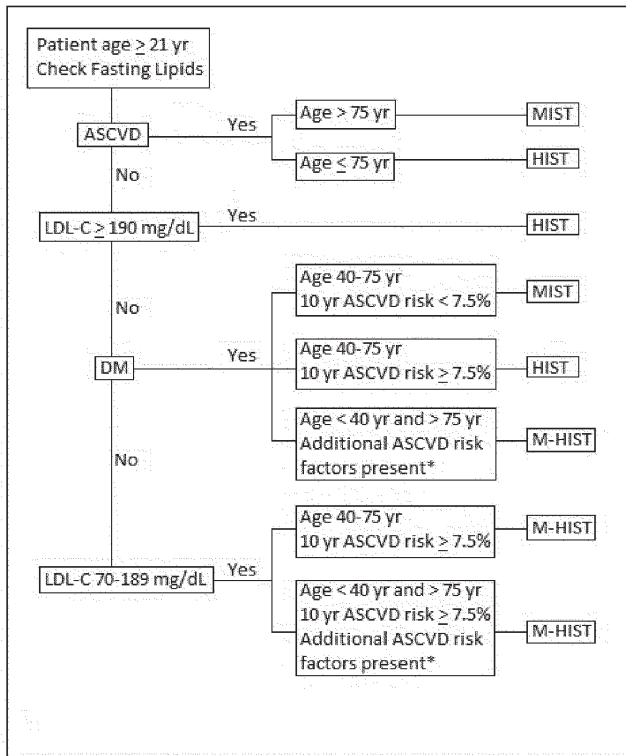
Figure 1: Flow Diagram of Cholesterol Management. (ASCVD = Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease; LDL-C = Low-density Lipoprotein Cholesterol; DM = Diabetes Mellitus; MIST = Moderate-intensity statin therapy; HIST = High-intensity statin therapy; M-HIST = Moderate to high-intensity statin therapy.)

* See Table 4.

Table 3: Common causes of secondary hyperlipidemia	
Elevated LDL-C	
Consumption if saturated or *trans* fats	Weight gain
Anorexia	Cholestasis
Nephrotic syndrome	Hypothyroidism
Cyclosporine	Amiodarone
Glucocorticoids	Diurestics
Obesity	Pregnancy
Elevated triglycerides	
Consumption of very low-fat food	Weight gain
Consumption of high amount of refined carbohydrates	Obesity
Consumption of excessive amount of alcohol	Pregnancy
Glucocorticoids	Oral estrogen
Protease inhibitors	Retinoic acid
Bile acid sequestrants	Raloxifene
Thiazide diuretics	Tamoxifen
Beta blockers (except carvedilol)	Nephrotic syndrome
Lipodystrophy	Chronic kidney disease
Poorly controlled diabetes mellitus	Hypothyroidism

Information from reference 3

assessment of CHD alone.[9] This equation was developed after an extensive review of diverse participants from several large studies. This equation should be used in

women and men aged 40–79 who have LDL-C levels of 70–189 mg/dL. The equation includes risk factors such as: gender, age, race (African-American or non-Hispanic Caucasian), total cholesterol, HDL-C, systolic blood pressure, receiving treatment for hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and smoking. The risk of ASCVD is generally lower in Hispanic and Asian populations, and higher in American-Indian populations compared with non-Hispanic Caucasians. For the purpose of risk assessment, patients of all other races should be entered as non-Hispanic Caucasian. The PCRAE calculator is easy to download as a Microsoft Excel auto-calculator.[3]

It is evident that gender, age, and race play major role in the risk assessment; changes in lifestyle can modify factors like blood pressure, diabetes mellitus, and smoking, which can alter the calculated 10-year risk of ASCVD in the same patient [Table 5]. The new guidelines are designed to address the context of a patient to be the prime basis of decision-making by the clinicians. Several concerns have been raised regarding potential recruitment of a larger number of the United States' population for statin therapy following the current cholesterol guidelines,[52] but the recommendations are based on the current evidence-based data that supports global CV risk reduction.[3,53]

Most Effective Therapeutic Agent – Statin

The data from RCTs and meta-analysis of RCTs[3] has shown that use of a "statin" provides substantial benefits in primary prevention of ASCVD and risk reduction in patients with LDL-C levels of 70 mg/dL and above.[16,54] Statins have also shown similar benefits in patients with hypertension,[55] diabetes,[39] low HDL-C,[15] elevated C-reactive protein,[38] etc. Additionally, it has been confirmed by the Cochrane meta-analysis[17] and the meta-analysis by the Cholesterol Treatment Trialists[12,18] that statin therapy for primary prevention reduces fatal and nonfatal ASCVD.

Table 4: Additional ASCVD risk factors
1. LDL-C > 160 mg/dL
2. Genetic hyperlipidemia
3. Family history of premature ASCVD in a first degree male member before age 55 years or first degree female member before age 65 years
4. Highly sensitive C-reactive protein (HS-CRP) > 2 mg/L
5. Coronary artery calcium (CAC) score of > 300 Agaston Units or > 75 percentile of age, sex, and ethnicity
6. Ankle-Brachial Index (ABI) < 0.9
7. Elevated lifetime risk of ASCVD

ASCVD = Atherosclerotic Cardiovascular Disease; LDL-C = Low-Density Lipoprotein Cholesterol

Information from reference 3

Table 5: 10-year risk of ASCVD by pooled cohort risk assessment equation										
Age (Year)	Race	Gender	TC (mg/dL)	HDL-C (mg/dL)	SBP (mmHg)	Treatment	DM smoking for HTN	Risk (%)	Statin	Therapy recommended
50	AA	M	200	50	130	N	N	Y	9.2	Y
50	AA	M	200	50	130	N	N	N	5.4	N
50	AA	F	200	50	130	N	N	Y	4.6	N
50	AA	F	200	50	130	N	N	N	2.3	N
50	C	M	200	50	130	N	N	Y	7.8	Y
50	C	M	200	50	130	N	N	N	3.6	N
50	C	F	200	50	130	N	N	Y	4.1	N
50	C	F	200	50	130	N	N	N	1.4	N

TC = Total Cholesterol, HDL-C = High-density Lipoprotein Cholesterol, SBP = Systolic Blood Pressure, HTN = Hypertension, DM = Diabetes Mellitus, AA = African-American, C = Non-Hispanic Caucasian, M = Male, F = Female, N = No, Y = Yes. Information from reference 10

An effective dose statin therapy has been defined as high-intensity or moderate-intensity [Tables 1 and 6]. The panel found that both high-intensity and moderate-to-high-intensity statin therapy are effective and safe in ASCVD risk reduction. On the contrary low-intensity statin therapy (e.g., Simvastatin 10 mg, Pravastatin 10–20 mg, Lovastatin 20 mg, Fluvastatin 20–40 mg, Pitavastatin 1 mg) may achieve a target LDL-C goal (as per ATP-III guidelines) without effective ASCVD risk reduction.[3] Similarly, patients may receive an ineffective low-intensity statin therapy with a nonstatin drug combination for presumed safety concerns of statin in order to achieve a specific target LDL-C goal, which does not offer ASCVD risk reduction either.[3] Patients on statin should be monitored for muscle injury, hepatic injury, new-onset diabetes, and other safety concerns [Table 7]. The risk of statin associated myopathy and hemorrhagic stroke is minimal compared with the excess risk of ASCVD due to lack of statin therapy.[12] Additional factors that influence ASCVD risk [Table 4] should be considered in the group of patients in whom the benefit of statin therapy for ASCVD prevention is less clear, such as in the case of patients without clinical ASCVD and without diabetes mellitus who are aged between 21 and 39 years and have LDL-C in the range of 71–189 mg/dL.[3]

Clinical Impact

It is estimated that the new cholesterol management guidelines could result in statin therapy for one in every three adults in the United States.[52] The new cholesterol management approach is primarily geared toward a comprehensive risk reduction of ASCVD, not just to attain a specific LDL-C goal level [Figure 2]. There are some

Table 6: Evidence based recommended statins	
High-intensity	Atorvastatin 40–80 mg daily
	Rosuvastatin 20–40 mg daily
Moderate-intensity	Atorvastatin 10–20 mg daily
	Rosuvastatin 10 mg daily
	Simvastatin 20–40 mg daily
	Pravastatin 40–80 mg daily
	Lovastatin 40 mg daily
	Fluvastatin XL 80 mg daily
	Fluvastatin 40 mg twice daily
	Pitavastatin 2–4 mg daily

Information from reference 3

Table 7: Statin safety: NHLBI grading the strength of recommendations		
Recommendation	Evidence rating	Reference
MIST should be used in patients who are in HIST group if they have severe renal or liver function impairment, stain intolerance or muscle disorder, unexplained elevated ALT >3 times ULN, >75 years of age, history of hemorrhagic stroke, Asian ancestry	A	[17,40,56-60]
CK should not be measured routinely	A	[38,42,43,58,60,61]
Baseline ALT should be checked before initiation of statin therapy	B	[56,59]
Evaluate for new-onset diabetes while on statin therapy	B	[41,62]
Statins should not be used in women of childbearing potential (pregnancy category X) unless effective contraception is used and they are not nursing	A	3

NHLBI = National Heart Lung and Blood Institute; MIST = Moderate-intensity statin therapy, HIST = High-intensity statin therapy, ALT = alanine transaminase, ULN = upper limit of normal, CK = creatinine kinase.

A = There is high certainty based on evidence that the net benefit is substantial; B = There is moderate certainty based on evidence that the net benefit is moderate to substantial, or there is high certainty that the net benefit is moderate; C = There is at least moderate certainty based on evidence that there is a small net benefit; D = There is at least moderate certainty based on evidence that it has no net benefit or that risks/harms outweigh benefits. For information about the NHLBI Grading the Strength of Recommendations, go to http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov. Information from reference 3
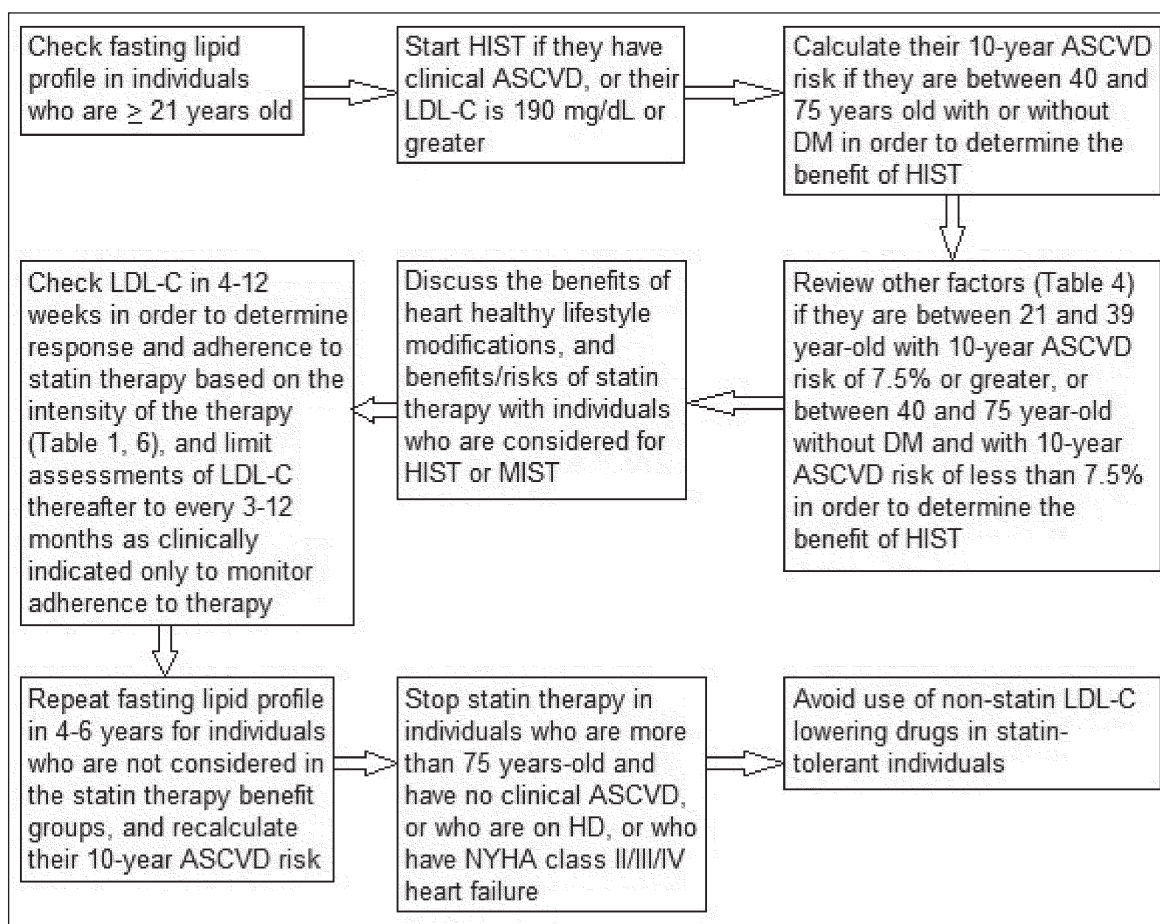
Figure 2: Suggested Steps to Manage Cholesterol. (ASCVD = Atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease, LDL-C = Low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, DM = Diabetes mellitus, HIST = High-intensity statin therapy, MIST = Moderate-intensity statin therapy, HD = Hemodialysis, NYHA = New York Heart Association.) Information from reference 3.

limitations of the new guidelines in specific groups, such as younger adults (aged 21–39 years), individuals with low 10-year ASCVD risk but high lifetime risk based on additional factors, individuals with serious comorbidities, such as HIV infection, rheumatologic disorders, solid organ transplant recipients. Future guidelines may provide management of hypertriglyceridemia, use of non-HDL-C in decision making, or use of therapeutic markers, such as Apo B, Lp(a), LDL particle size. More recent studies suggest a proper method of estimation of LDL-C level based on a calculation that uses a variable ratio of triglyceride (TG) and very low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (VLDL-C), and not just the standard 5:1 ratio of TG:VLDL-C as proposed by the Friedewald equation.[63,64] This may change the estimation of LDL-C level and allow clinicians to assign their patients appropriately into more accurate ASCVD risk category.

Conclusion

The current cholesterol management guidelines provide a comprehensive approach toward ASCVD risk reduction. It is a major shift from the old approach in which a target LDL-C was aimed in order to reduce cardiovascular risk only for the specific cardiovascular risk stratified patient categories. Moderate-intensity and high-intensity statin therapies are safe and effective interventions that have shown major ASCVD risk reduction in statin benefit groups. Clinicians are encouraged to use clinical judgment based on risks, benefits, drug interactions, and patient preference to statin therapy.

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