

What You Should Know About Niacin

What is Niacin?

Niacin, also known as nicotinic acid, is a form of vitamin B3 used to improve HDL (“good” cholesterol”) and lower triglycerides and LDL (“bad” cholesterol). It is also used to treat niacin deficiency.

What types of niacin are available?

There are four different types of niacin used to improve cholesterol: immediate-release, extended-release, long-acting (also referred to as sustained-release, controlled-release, or timed-release), and no-flush niacin. Immediate-release products are available over-the-counter or also by prescription in the U.S. (e.g., *Niacor*). *Niaspan* is an extended-release prescription product. The long-acting products (e.g., *Slo-Niacin* in the U.S.) and no-flush niacin (inositol hexaniacinate or hexanicotinate) are available over-the-counter. Another form of vitamin B3 you might see is niacinamide. But niacinamide has no effect on cholesterol.

Do all niacin products work?

The immediate-release, extended-release, and long-acting niacin products are all effective. The no-flush niacin products probably don’t work as well as regular niacin. When choosing a brand of niacin, you should be aware not all over-the-counter products contain the claimed amount of niacin. Products labeled with “USP,” “NSF,” or a DIN number (in Canada) have been tested for purity. Ask your pharmacist to help you select a good brand.

What are the side effects of niacin?

Niacin can cause flushing (redness) of the face and neck within the first two hours of taking a dose. Stomach upset, heartburn, nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea may also occur. At high doses, niacin can increase blood sugar, increase the risk for gout, and cause liver problems. Side effects can differ depending on the type of niacin you use.

The immediate-release niacins (e.g., *Niacor*) are more likely to cause flushing, especially when you first start taking them. Long-acting niacin (e.g., *Slo-Niacin*) is more likely to cause liver problems. The extended-release niacin (*Niaspan*) is less likely to cause the flushing that commonly occurs initially with immediate-release niacin. It is also less likely to cause liver problems than long-acting niacins, but it is much more expensive.

What can I do to decrease the side effects associated with taking niacin?

Flushing is a major complaint of patients taking niacin. Often this side effect will become less bothersome the longer you take niacin. Aspirin can help reduce flushing. If it’s O.K. with your healthcare provider, take aspirin 325 mg 30 minutes before you take your niacin (45 to 60 minutes before, if using enteric-coated aspirin). Avoiding alcohol, spicy foods, hot drinks, and hot showers shortly after taking niacin can also help. Taking niacin with food not only helps reduce flushing, but stomach upset as well. It is important to let your healthcare provider know if the side effects become too bothersome or if you notice vision problems, yellowing eyes or skin, or muscle aches.

My doctor prescribed Niaspan, but it’s too expensive. Can I use another niacin product?

Immediate-release niacin is a safe, effective, and much less expensive alternative to *Niaspan*. The downside is that immediate-release niacin causes more flushing initially and you’ll need to take it two to three times a day. *Niaspan* is taken only once a day. If you decide to switch to immediate-release niacin, you will need to ask your healthcare provider for dosing instructions. When switching to a new type of niacin, you need to start with a low dose. Increasing slowly to your normal dose will help reduce side effects. Also, niacin doses differ depending on the type you choose. You should avoid the long-acting niacins, because they can cause liver problems. Also avoid no-flush niacins, since they probably aren’t as effective.

Regardless of what type of niacin you use, it is important to see your healthcare provider on a regular basis so they can monitor your cholesterol, liver function, blood sugar, and uric acid.