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HEADLINE: Epilepsy drug lowers cholesterol

BYLINE: BY LISA SEACHRIST UPI Science Writer

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BODY:

The newest drug in the war against heart disease may be an old epilepsy medication, researchers said Wednesday. A new study of people at risk for or currently suffering from heart disease found that an anti-seizure medication raised the levels of "good" or HDL cholesterol by an average of 12.2 percent. The finding could offer another option for patients who can not tolerate current medications. "This could be a very powerful HDL raising medication," said cardiologist Dr. Michael Miller of the University of Maryland Medical Center in Baltimore. "Should the findings hold, it could be an effective treatment for people at risk for heart disease because of low HDL levels." Cholesterol comes in two different forms. High levels of low density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol have been shown to initiate artery-clogging, while high density lipoproteins (HDL) protect against heart disease. Even patients who have relatively low levels of total cholesterol are at a much increased risk for heart disease if they have low HDL levels -- the so-called "good" cholesterol -- compared with LDL levels. The impetus for trying the anti-seizure medication Dilantin comes from the fact that epileptics taking the drug have approximately 30 percent fewer deaths from heart disease as compared to the general population. Upon further investigation, researchers found that the epileptics had a 20 percent increase in their levels of HDL cholesterol. The Maryland researchers decided to test whether Dilantin could have the same effects on patients who did not have epilepsy. The researchers studied thirty-nine patients with low HDL levels. The patients were put on a low fat diet and given either a placebo or a dose of Dilantin roughly half that given to seizure patients. The researchers reported at the American Heart Association Meeting in Dallas that the Dilantin group increased their HDL levels an average of 12.2 percent. But, surprisingly, a particular component of HDL called HDL2 increased dramatically. "The HDL2 levels were increased by 70 percent," said Miller. "This is the type of cholesterol that is high in premenopausal women and marathon runners -- groups with very little heart disease." However, just how effective Dilantin and other drugs that raise HDL levels are in fighting heart attacks is still not known. Studies in progress should answer the question in the near future. Dilantin, which is currently prescribed for 1.1 million people in the United States, has been used for decades and its side effects are well known. "This drug could offer a good alternative for people who have trouble with nicotinic acid and gemfibrozil," said Miller. "But first we need to know if raising HDL levels will reduce heart attacks."

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