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With Dr. Mark Stengler

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DEEPER CURES FROM AMERICA'S TOP NATURAL PHYSICIAN

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## IS YOUR BLOOD TOO THICK?

**L**ate last year, there was big news in the pharmaceutical world with the announcement that several new blood-thinning medications were in development. The first to become available, *dabigatran* (Pradaxa), also was the first new oral blood-thinning medication to be approved in more than 50 years.

The excitement was understandable. Millions of Americans take blood-thinning medications such as *warfarin* (Coumadin)—and the new medications are promoted as being more effective and safer than the old ones. Only time will tell if they are safer, but all blood thinners have inherent serious risks such as the potential for excessive bleeding in any organ. And these medications are not indicated for relatively healthy people who want to prevent a stroke or heart attack. That's why I want to address the problem of thick blood—which is, after all, a main condition causing the need for all these blood thinners. I will tell you how you can determine if you are at risk for thick blood and how to treat it naturally.

### WHAT MAKES BLOOD THICK

One of the main ways that your blood becomes thicker than it should be involves a protein called *fibrinogen*. Fibrinogen is one of several proteins that assist in the coagulation process. Its specific job is to generate networks of fibers that link platelets together to stop blood flow. We need adequate levels of fibrinogen to stop

bleeding when we are injured. However, elevated fibrinogen levels are associated with excessive and spontaneous blood clotting (not in response to a wound), which compromises blood circulation and increases the risk for blood clots anywhere in the body. If a blood vessel is partially blocked by atherosclerotic plaque, those spontaneous clots can block the blood vessel completely, causing either a heart attack or stroke.

In addition to promoting clots and playing a role in the development and expansion of atherosclerotic plaque, elevated fibrinogen is believed to slow the flow of blood, which makes the heart work harder and reduces the flow of oxygen and nutrients to the heart, brain and all cells of the body. We know that elevated fibrinogen level is a risk factor (on its own) for heart attack and stroke.

### HOW FIBRINOGEN LEVELS BECOME ELEVATED

Remember that other risk marker for cardiovascular disease—*C-reactive protein* (CRP)? This sign of inflammation throughout the body is produced in the presence of all types of disease. In some cases, when CRP goes up, so do fibrinogen levels. As with CRP, fibrinogen levels are elevated when you are overweight...or have diabetes...a sedentary lifestyle...infection...reduced levels of estrogen (common as women age)...or stress. Fibrinogen also may be elevated because of genetics.

Studies attest to the danger of elevated fibrinogen levels. A 2005 meta-analysis published in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* involving data from more than 150,000 people found that elevated fibrinogen levels were associated with an increased risk for heart attack, stroke and overall mortality. And a recent study published in *Journal of Thrombosis and Haemostasis* found that fibrinogen levels were significantly higher in patients who had had an ischemic stroke than in patients who were healthy.

### THE TEST TO REQUEST

I recommend that all my patients get a blood test to assess their fibrinogen levels. Because most doctors don't routinely order this blood test, you will need to request it. It should be tested even if your CRP level is normal. I recommend getting tested for preventive purposes, especially if you smoke...are overweight...have hypertension, peripheral artery disease or diabetes...have family members with heart disease...or have unexplained fatigue...fibromyalgia...or memory/focus problems. These risk factors or medical conditions all incite an inflammatory response in the body—and a higher inflammatory response is responsible for an increase in the production of fibrinogen.

In the rare cases where they do order a blood test for fibrinogen levels,

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conventional medical doctors look for a range of between 200 milligrams per deciliter (mg/dL) and 400 mg/dL. Holistic doctors generally prefer to see the level slightly lower—between 180 mg/dL and 350 mg/dL. If your level is higher than this, I recommend working with a holistic doctor to incorporate the following natural blood-thinning program.

**Caution:** It's important to check with your doctor before taking any of these natural anticoagulants if you are already taking any blood-thinning medication.

#### HELP FOR HIGH FIBRINOGEN

Two natural blood thinners in particular are effective at reducing fibrinogen levels. Patients often take these supplements at increasing doses until their fibrinogen levels are in the normal range. Then they take both of these remedies indefinitely...

- **Nattokinase.** This enzyme is the most potent natural anticoagulant. It's extracted from *natto*, a fermented soy food eaten in Japan. In one study published in *Nutrition Research*, researchers gave nattokinase supplements to healthy people as well as to people with cardiovascular or kidney disease. After two months, most of the participants had significant reductions

in fibrinogen levels. Most people who use nattokinase start with 100 mg daily. They may increase to 200 mg daily if they need more. A 100-mg capsule contains about 2,000 fibrin units (FU). Doctors may prescribe higher levels if needed.

- **Omega-3s.** The two key omega-3 fats—*eicosapentaenoic acid* (EPA) and *docosahexaenoic acid* (DHA)—are mild blood thinners and are known to reduce inflammation. *Dose:* 2,000 mg to 3,000 mg daily of combined DHA and EPA.

#### NATURAL BLOOD THINNERS TO PREVENT THICK BLOOD

For patients whose fibrinogen levels are not high, I recommend that they take supplements to maintain healthful blood viscosity.

- **Omega-3s.** I recommend omega-3 fats (EPA and DHA), as noted above, for all patients. The dose that I usually recommend to prevent stroke and coronary disease is 1,000 mg daily of DHA and EPA.

- **B vitamins.** Numerous studies have shown that regular intake of folic acid and other B vitamins can reduce the risk for ischemic stroke by about one-fifth. Low levels of these vitamins can lead to abnormally high levels of *homocysteine*, which damage blood vessels. If you have elevated levels of

homocysteine, use a formula designated on the label as a homocysteine formula that includes folic acid and vitamins B-6 and B-12.

- **Vitamin E.** Vitamin E is a natural blood thinner. *Dose:* 1,200 international units (IU) to 2,000 IU daily of a vitamin E supplement. Look for a brand that says "mixed vitamin E" or lists all eight tocopherols and tocotrienols on the label.

- **Ginkgo biloba.** While the herb ginkgo biloba is a blood thinner, it also is rich in flavonoids that strengthen blood vessel walls. Studies have shown that ginkgo supplements increase blood flow to the brain. *Dose:* 180 mg daily of ginkgo.

- **Water.** Blood is mostly fluid, and this fluid comes from water. Many patients, especially seniors, don't drink enough water and suffer from chronic dehydration. Drinking about eight glasses of water daily can help maintain normal hydration and thin blood. ■ ■

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