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# Health chiefs back cholesterol drug with fewer side-effects

**Kat Lay** Health Editor

The first cholesterol-lowering pill in a decade for patients unable to tolerate statins has been approved by the treatments watchdog.

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) said bempedoic acid could be used for patients who found statin side effects unbearable. It can also be prescribed by GPs for people already taking statins, but whose cholesterol levels remain high.

The drug, which costs about £600 per year, is the first cholesterol-lowering tablet to receive Nice approval since ezetimibe, ten years ago. Trials showed the product, marketed as Nilemdo, could lower cholesterol by 28 per cent when taken on its own and by up to 40 per cent when combined with ezetimibe into a single pill. It works by reducing cholesterol production in the liver.

Many patients stop taking statins because of side effects including muscle pains, although a recent study found such effects were equally common if they took placebo pills instead.

Kausik Ray, the professor of public health at Imperial College London who led the trials, said that the pill offered an alternative for patients who did not qualify for more expensive injections.

“The vast majority of my patients tolerate statins absolutely fine but some people can’t,” he told the *Daily Mail*. “The challenge is, what if you’re somebody that cannot tolerate statins and their cholesterol levels remain too high with ezetimibe, but not high enough to be in that group who gets the more expensive injection.”

Injectable PCSK9 inhibitors, given fortnightly, are only supplied to NHS patients with extremely high cholesterol levels because of their cost, about £4,000 per year against £20 for statins.

Ray added: “So previously, we’ve just had to leave them in no-man’s land or people have had to pay out of pocket. This helps with this middle ground.”

He said that levels of so-called “bad” cholesterol, known as LDL-C, were a leading modifiable risk factor for car-

diovascular disease. Ray called the announcement “fantastic news” and added: “When it comes to heart health and cholesterol, there is no such thing as ‘too low LDL-C.’”

Jules Payne, chief executive of the cholesterol charity Heart UK, said: “High LDL-C levels accounts for one in four heart and circulatory disease deaths in the UK. High cholesterol is a silent killer and a condition that does not usually come with signs or symptoms, which is why we urge all adults to get a cholesterol check, regardless of age or how healthy they feel.”

While about seven million people take statins daily, a further six million who are eligible — a category including all over-75s and many in younger age groups — do not. The drugs have become the subject of a row over potential side effects, and whether heart health should be improved by lifestyle changes rather than medication.

Bempedoic acid is produced by the Japanese drug-maker Daiichi Sankyo.