**Side Effects of Niacin**

In doses typically used to control cholesterol the vitamin can have an annoying side effect known as “the niacin flush,” a temporary and sometimes itchy or tingling redness of the skin that lasts about 30 to 60 minutes.

“Doctors know that if they advise niacin, they get calls from patients complaining about flushing, particularly at first,” says Dr. Bale. “However, this problem is harmless and can often be avoided by starting with a low dose that’s gradually increased. ”Patients who experience flushing initially will typically find that the problem disappears or greatly diminishes over time.

While “non-flush” and extended-release forms of niacin are available, they appear to be less effective or may even have dangerous side effects, Dr. Bale adds. “There are two pathways through which the body can metabolize niacin, and the one that doesn’t cause flushing is more likely to harm the liver.”

Dr. Bale advises avoiding non-flush or extended-release formulations. In addition, niacin should only be used under the supervision of a healthcare provider, after a full discussion of the potential risks and benefits.

Like statins, niacin can cause muscle problems in some patients. It can also spark flare-ups in people with gout, and may contribute to GI bleeding in patients with ulcers, cautions Dr. Bale. “Any cholesterol treatment can cause side effects, but compared to statins, niacin is relatively safe.”