Icosapent ethyl (eicosapentaenoic acid ethyl ester): Effects on remnant-like particle cholesterol from the MARINE and ANCHOR studies

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Article history:
Received 1 June 2016
Received in revised form 9 August 2016
Accepted 17 August 2016
Available online 20 August 2016

Keywords:
Eicosapentaenoic acid
Omega-3 fatty acid
Hypertriglyceridemia
Remnant-like particle cholesterol
Triglycerides

Background and aims: Remnant-like particle cholesterol (RLP-C) is atherogenic and may increase atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease risk. Icosapent ethyl is a high-purity prescription eicosapentaenoic acid ethyl ester (approved as an adjunct to diet to reduce triglyceride [TG] levels in adult patients with TGs ≥500 mg/dL [≥5.65 mmol/L] at 4 g/day). In the MARINE and ANCHOR studies, icosapent ethyl reduced TG and other atherogenic lipid parameter levels without increasing low-density lipoprotein cholesterol (LDL-C) levels. This exploratory analysis evaluated the effects of icosapent ethyl on calculated and directly measured RLP-C.

Methods: MARINE (TGs ≥500 and <2000 mg/dL [≥5.65 mmol/L and <22.6 mmol/L]) and ANCHOR (TGs ≥200 and <500 mg/dL [≥2.26 and <5.65 mmol/L] despite statin-controlled LDL-C) were phase 3, 12-week, double-blind studies that randomized adult patients to icosapent ethyl 4 g/day, 2 g/day, or placebo. This analysis assessed median percent change from baseline to study end in directly measured (immunoseparation assay) RLP-C levels (MARINE, n = 218; ANCHOR, n = 252) and calculated RLP-C levels in the full populations.

Results: Icosapent ethyl 4 g/day significantly reduced directly measured RLP-C levels –29.8% (p = 0.004) in MARINE and –25.8% (p = 0.0001) in ANCHOR versus placebo, and also reduced directly measured RLP-C levels to a greater extent in subgroups with higher versus lower baseline TG levels, in patients receiving statins versus no statins (MARINE), and in patients receiving medium/higher-intensity versus lower-intensity statins (ANCHOR). Strong correlations were found between calculated and directly measured RLP-C for baseline, end-of-treatment, and percent change values in ANCHOR and MARINE (0.73–0.92; p < 0.0001 for all).

Conclusions: Icosapent ethyl 4 g/day significantly reduced calculated and directly measured RLP-C levels versus placebo in patients with elevated TG levels from the MARINE and ANCHOR studies.

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1. Introduction

Triglyceride (TG)-rich apolipoprotein B (ApoB)-containing lipoproteins released from the intestine or liver undergo lipolysis at the surface of endothelial cells, creating TG-poor and cholesterol-rich remnant particles (e.g., chylomicron remnants in the non-fasting state and dense subfractions of very-low-density lipoprotein [VLDL] and intermediate-density lipoprotein in the fasting and non-fasting states) [1,2]. An indirect approximation of remnant lipoprotein cholesterol (RLP-C) levels can be readily achieved by subtracting the cholesterol carried by low-density lipoproteins (LDL-C) from the cholesterol carried by all atherogenic lipoproteins, as reflected by non-high-density lipoprotein cholesterol (non-HDL-C), which in turn is calculated by subtracting high-density lipoprotein cholesterol levels from total cholesterol levels.
lipoprotein cholesterol (HDL-C) from total cholesterol (TC) (i.e., RLP-C = TC \[–\] HDL-C \[–\] [LDL-C]) [3]. More direct measures of RLP-C levels include immunoseparation and vertical auto profile testing [4]. Direct isolation of remnants allows for a more accurate measurement of the atherogenic cholesterol within the TG-rich lipoprotein subpopulation than calculated RLP-C, but such direct measures are not readily available to practicing clinicians [5].

High RLP-C levels appear to be a risk factor for atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease in patients with coronary artery disease, diabetes, or metabolic syndrome, as well as those on statin therapy [6–10]. Overall, current evidence suggests that elevated remnant cholesterol levels are one of the causal factors of residual ischemic heart disease risk [3] and cardiovascular disease [11].

Icosapent ethyl (Vascepa®; Amarin Pharma Inc., Bedminster, NJ, USA) is a high-purity prescription form of eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) ethyl ester approved by the US Food and Drug Administration as an adjunct to diet to reduce TG levels in adult patients with severe hypertriglyceridemia (≥500 mg/dL [≥5.65 mmol/L]) at a dose of 4 g/day [12]. Two randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled, multicenter, phase 3 studies (MARINE and ANCHOR) demonstrated the efficacy and safety of icosapent ethyl 2 g/day and 4 g/day. In both studies, icosapent ethyl 4 g/day significantly reduced TG levels and improved other lipid parameters including non-HDL-C and ApoB, without raising LDL-C levels compared with placebo [13,14]. To gain a better understanding of the lipid effects of icosapent ethyl, this exploratory analysis evaluated the impact of icosapent ethyl on directly measured and calculated RLP-C levels in patients from the MARINE and ANCHOR studies.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study design

Details of the MARINE and ANCHOR studies have been published previously [13,14]. Briefly, both studies included a 4–6 week lead-in period of diet, lifestyle, and medication stabilization with washout of prohibited lipid-altering medications. Both studies randomized patients aged >18 years with qualifying lipid levels (TGs ≥500 and ≤2000 mg/dL [≥5.65 and <22.6 mmol/L] in MARINE; statin-stabilized TGs ≥200 and <500 mg/dL [≥2.26 and <5.65 mmol/L] and LDL-C ≥40 and <100 mg/dL [≥1.04 and <2.59 mmol/L] in ANCHOR) to receive icosapent ethyl 4 g/day, icosapent ethyl 2 g/day, or matching placebo during a 12-week double-blind treatment period. The MARINE study permitted, but did not require stable statin therapy with or without ezetimibe. Enrollment in the ANCHOR study required patients to be at high risk of cardiovascular disease as defined by the National Cholesterol Education Program Adult Treatment Panel III guidelines [15] and on a stable statin dose (atorvastatin, rosuvastatin, or simvastatin with or without ezetimibe) prior to baseline initiation of icosapent ethyl or placebo. The protocols for each study were approved by the appropriate institutional review boards, and all patients provided written informed consent before enrollment [13,14].

2.2. Assessments and measurements

The MARINE and ANCHOR studies measured serum RLP-C levels as a prespecified exploratory endpoint using an immunoseparation assay from Polymedco (Cortlandt, NY, USA) on a Daytona chemistry analyzer (Randox Laboratories, Crumlin, UK) [16–18]. A central laboratory measured other lipid parameters as previously described, including LDL-C measurements by preparative ultracentrifugation (beta-quantification) [13,19]. Plasma lipid parameter evaluations included patients from the intent-to-treat population, defined as all randomized patients who had a baseline TG measurement, received ≥1 dose of the study drug, and had ≥1 post-randomization efficacy measurement.

2.3. Statistical analysis

Medians and interquartile ranges of RLP-C were calculated for each treatment group at baseline and at week 12, and for the percent changes from baseline. The median differences in percent changes from baseline for RLP-C were estimated between the icosapent ethyl and placebo groups using the Hodges-Lehmann method, with the Wilcoxon rank sum test used to calculate p values. Subgroup analyses were conducted by baseline TG level in each study, by statin use in the MARINE study, and by the statin intensity (lower vs medium/higher) in the ANCHOR study. This post hoc analysis computed Pearson correlation coefficients to assess the relationships between calculated RLP-C and directly measured RLP-C for baseline, week 12, and percent change from baseline values. Each analysis utilized pooled data from the icosapent ethyl treatment and placebo groups. A p value of 0.05 was the pre-specified alpha for significance for exploratory endpoints in the MARINE and ANCHOR studies and was used in all analyses, including post hoc analyses in this report. The formula of RLP-C (TC \[–\] [HDL-C] \[–\] [LDL-C]) being measured or calculated) was employed for correlation analyses involving calculated RLP-C levels [3]. For these RLP-C calculations, LDL-C was either directly measured by preparative ultracentrifugation (beta-quantification) or, when applicable, calculated. When calculated LDL-C was included in the RLP-C equation, the Friedewald equation (LDL-C = TC \[–\] [HDL-C] \[–\] [TG/5]) was applied, but only for patients with TG levels <400 mg/dL (<4.52 mmol/L) [20]. When applicable, resulting calculated RLP-C values are reported for both LDL-C methods.

3. Results

3.1. Patients

Baseline demographics and lipid parameters were comparable among treatment groups within each study (Table 1). In MARINE, 57 of 229 patients (25%) were receiving statin therapy, whereas in ANCHOR, all 702 patients were on statins, of whom 654 (93%) were on medium- or higher-intensity statin regimens (definitions of medium- and higher-intensity statin regimens are listed in the legend of Table 2). An immunoseparation assay was used to assess total RLP-C levels in MARINE and ANCHOR. In MARINE, RLP-C measurements were available from 218 patients (95% of study cohort); in ANCHOR, as prespecified in the study protocol, RLP-C measurements were to be conducted in (approximately) the first 240 patients enrolled (actual n = 252; 36% of study cohort).

Within each study, treatment groups showed comparable median baseline levels of TGs, non-HDL-C, LDL-C, VLDL-C, VLDL-TG, and ApoB in the subset of patients with RLP-C measurements (Table 1) as well as in the intent-to-treat populations of each study [13,14]. Each study also had comparable median RLP-C levels at baseline across treatment groups, ranging from 43.0 to 47.0 mg/dL (1.11–1.22 mmol/L) in MARINE and from 13.5 to 15.0 mg/dL (0.35–0.39 mmol/L) in ANCHOR (Table 2).

3.2. MARINE

At the approved dose of 4 g/day, icosapent ethyl significantly reduced median levels of directly measured RLP-C by −29.8% (p = 0.004) (Fig. 1 and Table 2) versus placebo. When evaluated by statin use, icosapent ethyl 4 g/day significantly reduced directly measured RLP-C levels by −21.4% in patients not receiving statins.
m = 77) and by 56.8% in those receiving statins (p = 0.02; n = 28) versus placebo; icosapent ethyl 4 g/day also reduced directly measured RLP-C levels in patients with baseline TG levels >750 mg/dL (>8.48 mmol/L; p = 0.02; n = 28) versus placebo; icosapent ethyl 4 g/day also reduced directly measured RLP-C levels in patients with baseline TG levels >750 mg/dL (>8.48 mmol/L) versus placebo, although this reduction only approached significance (p = 0.06; n = 47) (Table 2).

3.3. ANCHOR

Icosapent ethyl 4 g/day significantly reduced median levels of directly measured RLP-C by −25.8% (p = 0.0001) overall compared with placebo (Fig. 1 and Table 2). The effect of icosapent ethyl 4 g/day on directly measured RLP-C levels was statistically significant versus placebo in patients with TG values below or above the study-wide baseline median of 259 mg/dL (2.93 mmol/L); icosapent ethyl 4 g/day reduced directly measured RLP-C levels by −22.2% in patients with TG levels below the median (p = 0.03; n = 42) and by −30.6% in those with TG levels above the median (p = 0.001; n = 40) (Table 2). When evaluated by statin regimen intensity, icosapent ethyl 4 g/day significantly reduced directly measured RLP-C levels by −26.7% (p < 0.001; n = 77) versus placebo when used with a medium- or higher-intensity statin regimen, whereas changes were not statistically significant versus placebo when icosapent ethyl 4 g/day was used with a lower-intensity statin regimen (p = 0.5; n = 5) (Table 2).

3.4. Correlation analyses

Calculated RLP-C levels from both the MARINE and ANCHOR studies correlated with directly measured RLP-C levels (r = 0.63–0.92; p < 0.0001 for all) in analyses of values at baseline, week 12, and percent change from baseline. In ANCHOR, directly measured RLP-C had higher correlations with calculated values that were derived from LDL-C measured with beta-quantification at baseline and follow-up (0.79 and 0.91, respectively) compared with the LDL-C derived by the Friedewald equation (0.63 and 0.76) (Table 3). In MARINE and ANCHOR, similar percent changes from baseline versus placebo were seen for directly measured and calculated RLP-C using LDL-C measured by beta-quantification, with a larger discrepancy between results observed in ANCHOR between directly measured and calculated RLP-C when using LDL-C derived by the Friedewald equation (Table 3).

4. Discussion

High RLP-C or remnant cholesterol levels are strong markers of coronary risk and are likely causal factors for ischemic heart disease [3,6,21,22]. The present analysis examined the effects of icosapent ethyl on directly measured and calculated RLP-C levels in patients with very high TG levels with or without concomitant statin therapy from the MARINE study and in patients with high TG levels despite statin therapy from the ANCHOR study. Previous analyses reported that icosapent ethyl 4 g/day significantly lowered TG, non-HDL-C, ApoB, and ApoC-III levels and decreased LDL particle number compared with placebo (i.e., potentially reducing LDL atherogenicity) without increasing LDL-C levels [13,14,23,24]. The present report demonstrates that icosapent ethyl significantly reduces RLP-C compared with placebo in patients from the MARINE and ANCHOR studies as measured directly via an immunoseparation assay or when calculated. In these studies, icosapent ethyl 4 g/day reduced RLP-C across a wide range of baseline TG levels, with
reductions in RLP-C greatest among patients with higher baseline TG levels.

As statins are the cornerstone of lipid-lowering therapy, it is worth noting that icosapent ethyl 4 g/day reduced RLP-C with or without concomitant statin therapy in the MARINE study and in the statin-treated patients in the ANCHOR study. In the latter study, the reductions in RLP-C with icosapent ethyl 4 g/day appeared greater in patients receiving medium-to-high-intensity statin regimens than in patients receiving lower-intensity statin regimens. However, small sample size may be a limiting factor in the subgroup analyses of patients receiving lower-intensity statin regimens in the ANCHOR study, and of patients receiving statin therapy in the MARINE study. The medium- and higher-intensity statin regimens used in this analysis correspond with current recommendations for statin therapy [25,26].

Results of the present analysis expand on previously reported results in patients with type 2 diabetes in the ANCHOR study, showing that treatment with icosapent ethyl 4 g/day reduced directly measured RLP-C levels by −25% versus placebo (p < 0.01) in this patient subset [27]. Other prescription omega-3 fatty acid products, including another pure EPA product from Japan, as well as products containing both EPA and docosahexaenoic acid, have also been reported to reduce RLP-C levels in plasma at moderate to high doses [27–33].

Residual cardiovascular risk can persist in patients with elevated TG and RLP-C levels even after lowering of LDL-C levels [1,6,7]. Some of this residual risk may be explained by elevated remnant cholesterol levels. Notably, standard measurements of TG levels or LDL-C calculations do not account for this atherogenic cholesterol content [34]. Cholesterol-rich remnant lipoprotein particles may

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Directly measured RLP-C concentration</th>
<th>Median change from baseline in RLP-C concentration vs. placebo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Icosapent ethyl 4 g/day</td>
<td>Icosapent ethyl 2 g/day</td>
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<tr>
<td>Baseline, mg/dL</td>
<td>End of treatment, mg/dL</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>MARINE</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>≤750 mg/dL</td>
<td>&gt;750 mg/dL</td>
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<td>n – 76</td>
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<td>n – 75</td>
<td>n – 70</td>
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<td>Current statin use</td>
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<td>≤750 mg/dL</td>
<td>&gt;750 mg/dL</td>
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<td>n – 56</td>
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<td>n – 56</td>
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<td>Baseline TG (mg/dL)</td>
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<td>≤750 mg/dL</td>
<td>&gt;750 mg/dL</td>
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<td>n – 47</td>
<td>n – 28</td>
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<td>Statin intensity</td>
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<td>Lower</td>
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<td>n – 5</td>
<td>n – 7</td>
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<td>n – 16</td>
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<td>Medium and higher</td>
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<td>n – 80</td>
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<td>n – 77</td>
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<tr>
<td>Study-wide median TG (259 mg/dL)</td>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;259 mg/dL</td>
<td>≥259 mg/dL</td>
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<td>n – 42</td>
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<td>≥259 mg/dL</td>
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<td>n – 110</td>
<td>n – 110</td>
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<tr>
<td>n – 40</td>
<td>(5.0)</td>
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</tbody>
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ITT, intent to treat.

a Data are presented as medians (interquartile ranges) for endpoint values. To convert from mg/dL to the International System unit of mmol/L, multiply cholesterol by 0.0259 and multiply TG by 0.0113.

b Median percent changes vs placebo are Hodges-Lehmann medians.

c Patients from ITT populations with RLP-C measurements.

d Per study protocol, patients in MARINE were stratified at randomization by baseline TG level ≤750 mg/dL and >750 mg/dL.

e Lower-intensity statin regimens: simvastatin 5–10 mg; medium- and higher-intensity statin regimens: rosuvastatin 5–10 mg, atorvastatin 10–20 mg, simvastatin 20–40 mg, simvastatin 10–20 mg plus ezetimibe 5–10 mg, rosuvastatin 20–40 mg, atorvastatin 40–80 mg, simvastatin 80 mg, simvastatin 40–80 mg plus ezetimibe 5–10 mg.

f Study-wide median represents the median of patients assessed in the 4 g/day, 2 g/day, and placebo groups.

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including impaired endothelial vasodilatation and abnormal lipoprotein particles can induce endothelial dysfunction, foam cell formation, and vascular inflammation [35–37]. RLP-C may have pro-inflammatory properties and may cause endothelial dysfunction via actions on endothelial nitric oxide synthase [37]. Remnant-like lipoprotein particles can induce endothelial dysfunction, including impaired endothelial vasodilatation and abnormal endothelial secretion, thereby contributing to development of atherosclerosis [37]. RLP-C levels also correlate with the vulnerability of coronary plaques for rupture [38]. Thus, add-on therapy to a statin may be needed to address residual cardiovascular risk. The recent IMPROVE-IT outcomes study demonstrated that statin add-on therapy can help address residual cardiovascular risk and that lower LDL-C levels are associated with lower risk [39,40]. The present results show that, compared with placebo, icosapent ethyl lowers RLP-C levels in statin-treated patients in addition to its previously reported reductions in TG, non-HDL-C, ApoB, and Apo-C-III levels and LDL particle number without increasing LDL-C levels. These findings suggest that icosapent ethyl 4 g/day may provide a beneficial option in a statin-treated patient population such as that of ANCHOR. The ongoing REDUCE-IT trial (NCT01492361) is evaluating whether icosapent ethyl 4 g/day will reduce cardiovascular events when used as an adjunct to statin therapy in patients with persistently high TG levels who have a high risk of future cardiovascular events [41]. It should be noted that icosapent ethyl is not approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration to reduce the risk of coronary heart disease; the effect of icosapent ethyl on the risk of cardiovascular mortality and morbidity has not been determined.

As noted earlier, different methods (calculated, vertical auto profile testing, and immunoseparation) may be used to measure RLP-C, but these methods currently lack standardization. A recent study found that reductions observed with one method can be expected to occur across all methods, but RLP-C defined by immunoseparation and vertical auto profile testing may differ in mass and response to pharmacologic intervention [4]. Thus, standardization of measurement methods may be needed for use of RLP-C in assessing cardiovascular risk [4]. In our correlation analyses of calculated RLP-C versus directly measured RLP-C, we found strong correlations in baseline, 12-week, and percent change from baseline analyses, despite differences in the amount of RLP-C reported by each method. Furthermore, we also found statistically significant correlations between directly measured RLP-C and calculated RLP-C when RLP-C was derived from LDL-C values based on either the Friedewald equation for patients with TG levels <400 mg/dL (<4.52 mmol/L) or based on beta-quantification wherein the cholesterol content of LDL is directly measured. While direct RLP-C measurements require a specific test that utilizes a two-step immunoseparation procedure, clinicians can quickly calculate RLP-C from a standard lipid panel by subtracting LDL-C from non-HDL-C [3]. These methods, however, do not produce identical values; yet, in clinical practice, change in calculated RLP-C may still provide a useful and readily accessible estimation of how interventions such as icosapent ethyl may be impacting a patient’s remnant cholesterol burden. Although direct measurements of RLP-C in this study had a better correlation to calculated RLP-C when using LDL-C measured with beta quantification, RLP-C calculated using Friedewald-derived LDL-C may represent an easily accessible and inexpensive means in clinical practice to monitor approximate changes in RLP-C for patients with TG < 400 mg/dL (<4.52 mmol/L). Large prospective clinical outcome studies are needed to fully assess the effects of icosapent ethyl on remnant cholesterol.

Mechanisms by which icosapent ethyl may decrease RLP-C have not yet been fully elucidated but may result from a reduction in VLDL particle number through reduced hepatic release and/or increased plasma clearance. The potential mechanisms of action of EPA include increased β-oxidation; inhibition of acyl-CoA:1,2-diacylglycerol acyltransferase; decreased lipogenesis in the liver; and increased plasma lipoprotein lipase activity [42].

In addition to limitations mentioned earlier, it should be noted that although the data are not pooled, they come from two different

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**Fig. 1.** Median percent change from baseline to week 12 vs. placebo in directly measured RLP-C levels in patients from the MARINE and ANCHOR studies. Median differences in percent changes vs. placebo are Hodges-Lehmann medians. *p < 0.01; †p = 0.0001; ‡p < 0.05; NS, not significant; RLP-C, remnant-like particle cholesterol.

**Fig. 2.** Median percent change from baseline to week 12 vs. placebo in directly measured RLP-C levels by statin use in patients from the MARINE study. Median differences in percent changes vs. placebo are Hodges-Lehmann medians. *p < 0.005; NS, not significant; RLP-C, remnant-like particle cholesterol.
studies with patient populations that differed in terms of lipids (e.g., baseline TG levels were higher in MARINE than in ANCHOR by design), demographics (e.g., MARINE was an international study, while MARINE: n = 75 for placebo; ANCHOR: n = 82 for icosapent ethyl 4 g/day, n = 86 for placebo), and medication use (e.g., statin use was allowed in MARINE and required in ANCHOR).

In summary, icosapent ethyl 4 g/day, as compared with placebo, significantly reduced RLP-C in addition to its previously described lipid effects of icosapent ethyl in patients with elevated TG levels, including those on statin therapy. The ongoing REDUCE-IT trial will help to clarify whether the improvements in RLP-C and other atherogenic parameters seen with high-purity prescription EPA at 4 g/day will translate to a reduction in major cardiovascular events in high-risk patients, and present and future treatment, Pharmacol. Ther. 141 (2014) 31.7–31.7.

### Financial support
This study was sponsored by Amarin Pharma Inc., Bedminster, NJ, USA. Medical writing assistance was provided by Peloton Advantage, LLC, Parsippany, NJ, USA, and was funded by Amarin Pharma Inc. Authors Philip, Juliano, and Doyle are employees of Amarin Pharma Inc. and stock holders of Amarin Pharma Inc.

Drs. Braun, Dr. Philip, and Mr. Doyle are employees and stock holders of Amarin Pharma Inc. and stock holders of Amarin Pharma Inc.

### Conflict of interest
Dr. Ballantyne has received research/grant support from Abbott Diagnostics, Amarin Pharma Inc., Amgen, Eli Lilly, Esperion, Ionis, Novartis, Otsuka, Pfizer, Regeneron, Roche Diagnostic, Sanofi-Synthelabo, Takeda, NIH, ADA, and AHA (all paid to institution, not individual), and is a consultant for Abbott Diagnostics, Amarin Pharma Inc., Amgen, AstraZeneca, Eli Lilly, Esperion, Genzyme, Matinas Biopharma, Merck, Novartis, Pfizer, Regeneron, Roche Diagnostics, and Sanofi-Synthelabo.

Dr. Harold Bays owns no pharmaceutical stocks or patents. In the past 36 months, Dr. Harold Bays' research site has received research grants from Amarin Pharma Inc., Amgen, Ardea, Arisaph, AstraZeneca, Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Catabasis, Cymabay, Eisai, Elcelyx, Eli Lilly, Esperion, Ferrer/Chiltern, Grip, GSK, Hanmi, Hisun, Hoffman LaRoche, Home Access, Janssen, Johnson & Johnson, Kowa, Merck, Novartis, NovoNordisk, Omthera, Orexi- gen, Pfizer, Pronova, Regeneron, Sanofi, Takeda, and TIMI. In the past 36 months, Dr. Harold Bays has served as a consultant/advisor for Akcea, Alnylam, Amgen, AstraZeneca, Catabasis, Eli Lilly, Ionis, Jansen, Johnson & Johnson, Merck, Novartis, Pronova, Regeneron, Sanofi, and Takeda. In the past 36 months, Dr. Harold Bays has served as a speaker for Amarin Pharma Inc., Amgen, AstraZeneca, Bristol-Meyers Squibb, Catabasis, Cymabay, Eisai, Orexigen, Regeneron, Sanofi, and Takeda.

Dr. Philip, Dr. Juliano, and Mr. Doyle are employees and stock holders of Amarin Pharma Inc.

### Acknowledgments
Medical scientific reference checks and associated assistance were provided by Joy Bronson of Amarin Pharma Inc.

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