

Treating Elevated Cholesterol with Statins

What are statins and who needs them? Statins are drugs that doctors prescribe to lower cholesterol. They are lovastatin (*Mevacor®*), pravastatin (*Pravachol®*), simvastatin (*Zocor®*), fluvastatin (*Lescol®*), atorvastatin (*Lipitor®*), rosuvastatin (*Crestor®/Ezallor®*), pitavastatin (*Livalo®, Zypitamag®*). These drugs stop your body from making too much cholesterol.

A low fat diet, exercise, weight loss, quitting smoking and keeping your blood pressure low are all part of having a healthy heart. Statins are started when diet and exercise haven't worked. They may also be started if your risk of a heart attack or stroke is high.

If you have heart disease or poor blood flow to your legs, you may be started on a statin to prevent a heart attack or stroke. If you have already had a heart attack or stroke, the statin may prevent it from happening again.

What is the difference between statins? Statins lower the “bad” cholesterol (LDL) more than other drugs. They also lower the fat in your blood (triglycerides) and increase the “good” cholesterol (HDL). In general, all statins will lower cholesterol. The amount of statin needed to lower cholesterol depends on the drug. For example, 20mg of atorvastatin will lower cholesterol about the same as 5mg of rosuvastatin or 40mg of simvastatin.

Are there side effects I should be concerned about? The most common side effects are constipation, diarrhea, dizziness, gas, headache, heartburn, skin rash, stomach pain, or upset stomach. These side effects will go away over time. More serious side effects include liver problems, muscle pain and tenderness. If you have kidney disease you may need a lower dose. If you are pregnant or breast feeding, or wish to become pregnant, you should not take a statin. Some prescription and over the counter medications should not be taken with statins. It is important to speak with your doctor or pharmacist about your medication.

What evidence is there that the cholesterol medicine I am taking works? Studies have shown statins lower the chance you'll have a heart attack, stroke, or early death. They do not prevent these things from happening; they only reduce your risk of having them happen to you.

- **Heart attacks:** People with heart disease, diabetes, or poor blood flow to their legs that took statins for 3 to 5 years had fewer heart attacks.
- **Reduction in Death:** People with heart disease, diabetes, or poor blood flow to their legs that took statins for 3 to 5 years had a lower risk of dying from heart attacks as similar people that did not take statins.

How can I save money?

- Ask your prescriber for less expensive generics.
- Cut a higher dose in half with a tablet splitter.
- If you have a prescription plan on your insurance, find out what medications are covered.

References: Cholesterol-Lowering Drugs: The Statins • Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs. This report was last updated in February 2007; pages 1-18. Cholesterol lowering agents. Pharmacist's/Prescriber's Letter. 2006;22(8):220802. National Cholesterol Education Program; ATP III Guidelines At-A-Glance Quick Desk Reference. <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/cholesterol/dskref.htm>.