

Statins: Life-Saving Medicines

The Pharmacy team of the Vanderbilt Health Affiliated Network (VHAN) answers some of the most frequently asked questions about statins.

What are statins?

Statins are medicines that help lower your cholesterol and prevent heart disease. Statins reduce your risk of heart disease by about 33%.

What are examples of statins?

Here are the four most common statins, with their generic name followed by their brand name:

- Atorvastatin (Lipitor)
- Pravastatin (Pravachol)
- Rosuvastatin (Crestor)
- Simvastatin (Zocor)

Who needs a statin?

- Adults who have had a heart attack, stroke or heart disease, even if they have normal cholesterol
- Adults with diabetes type 1 or 2, even if they have normal cholesterol
- Adults with high LDL (often called “bad”) cholesterol
- Adults with peripheral artery disease (PAD)
- Other adults who are at higher risk of having a heart attack or stroke

Why is high cholesterol bad for me?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance in your blood. Over time, high cholesterol can lead to a heart attack or a stroke. The risk is higher in patients with high cholesterol and diabetes.



What are the risk factors for heart disease and stroke?

- Age and gender: Men who are 45 years old and older, and women who are 55 years old and older
- Family history: Male relative with heart problems before the age of 55, and female relative with heart problems before the age of 65
- Tobacco use (smoking, vaping)
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Little or no exercise
- Diet high in saturated and trans fats, cholesterol, sugar or alcohol

What are the side effects of statins?

Most people do not have any side effects with statins. However, the following side effects are possible with statins:

- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Constipation
- Muscle pain

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5 Statin Myth-Busters

Have you heard these five common myths about statins?

Myth No. 1: “If one statin gives me muscle pain and weakness, all statins will.”

While muscle aches or weakness can occur in 1 in 10 patients, these side effects are usually mild and temporary. Severe muscle pain is rare.

Patients who have experienced muscle pain with a statin often have no muscle pain with a lower dose of the same statin or with any dose of a different statin. Rosuvastatin (Crestor) and pravastatin (Pravachol) are good options if you have had muscle pain with other statins because these medicines are less likely to get into the muscle cells.

Myth No. 2: “Statins are only needed if I have high cholesterol.”

Statins can be beneficial for people with a high risk of heart disease, even if your cholesterol levels are within the normal range. Risk factors such as your age, family history and other health conditions, like diabetes, can increase your risk.

Myth No. 3: “Statins can give me diabetes.”

Statins, especially at higher doses, may slightly increase blood sugars in people who already have high blood sugar. This can lead to diabetes being diagnosed sooner. However, the benefits of statins far outweigh the risks of slight increases in blood sugar. Statins reduce the risks of heart attack, stroke and death, especially in people with diabetes.

Myth No. 4: “A natural supplement like red yeast rice is safer than a statin.”

Medicines such as statins must be proven safe and effective before they can be prescribed. Statins have been proven to prevent heart disease. Supplements have not. Supplements are not regulated the way medicines are. This means supplements can vary in strength and can contain ingredients not listed on its label. “Natural” doesn’t always mean safe.

Myth No. 5: “Statins are a magic pill for heart disease.”

While statins can reduce the risk of heart disease, they are not a substitute for a healthy lifestyle. Eating a balanced diet, exercising regularly and avoiding smoking are also essential for heart health.

Taking a statin may significantly lower your risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

