

High Cholesterol: Medicines



Medicine can be used to treat high cholesterol. The goal of treatment is to lower your chance of having a heart attack or stroke. The goal is not to lower your cholesterol numbers only.

Medicine is always used along with a plan for a heart-healthy lifestyle, not instead of it. A heart-healthy lifestyle includes eating healthy foods, being active, staying at a healthy weight, and not smoking.

Statins

Statins lower cholesterol by blocking how much cholesterol your body makes. This prevents cholesterol from building up in blood vessels called arteries. This is called hardening of the arteries, or atherosclerosis. It is the starting point for some heart and blood flow problems, such as heart disease.

Statins may also reduce inflammation around the buildup in the arteries (called plaque). This can lower the risk that the plaque will break apart and lead to a heart attack or stroke.

Statins include atorvastatin, lovastatin, pravastatin, and simvastatin.

Statins don't cause side effects in most people. When side effects happen, they tend to include minor problems. Serious problems are rare.

- You may feel tired.
- You may have minor muscle aches (not severe pain).
- You may have belly pain, gas, cramps, constipation, or an upset stomach.

Lifestyle changes

A heart-healthy lifestyle is important for lowering your risk whether you take statins or not.

- Eat a heart-healthy diet that is rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, fish, and low-fat or nonfat dairy foods.
- Be active on most days of the week.
- Lose weight if you need to, and stay at a healthy weight.
- Don't smoke.

Other medicine

Other medicines can improve cholesterol levels, but they have not been proven to lower the risk of a heart attack or a stroke.

Your doctor may recommend these medicines if there is a reason you can't take a statin. These medicines include bile acid sequestrants, cholesterol absorption inhibitors, fibric acid derivatives, and nicotinic acid (niacin).

Deciding about statins

Talk with your doctor about your risk of a heart attack and stroke. Together you can decide if medicine is right for you.

Your doctor may recommend that you take statins if the benefits outweigh the risks.

For some people, the benefits of statins clearly outweigh the risks. That's because their chance of having a heart attack or stroke is high, and statins can reduce this risk.

Your doctor is likely to recommend statins if you:

- Have heart disease.
- Have peripheral arterial disease.
- Had a heart attack.
- Had a stroke.

Your doctor may recommend statins if:

- Your LDL cholesterol is 190 mg/dL or above.
- You have diabetes and you are age 40 to 75.
- Your 10-year risk of heart attack or stroke is 7.5% or above and you are age 40 to 75.

For other people, it's not as clear if they need to take a statin. You and your doctor will need to look at your overall health and any other risks you have for heart attack and stroke. Together, you can decide what treatment is best for you.

Taking these medicines

Here are some ways to be safe with medicine:

- **Take all medicines exactly as prescribed.** Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.
- Tell your doctor everything you take, including vitamins or herbal supplements. Some medicines may react with statins or other drugs.
- Ask your doctor if you need to avoid grapefruit and grapefruit juice because of the medicine you take.

When to call your doctor

Muscle pain can be a very serious but rare side effect of statins. **Call your doctor now** if you have severe muscle pain, weakness, or brown urine. This can be a sign of a very serious muscle reaction called rhabdomyolysis.