

# Choosing Wisely<sup>®</sup>

*An initiative of the ABIM Foundation*



THE SOCIETY  
FOR POST-ACUTE AND  
LONG-TERM  
CARE MEDICINE<sup>™</sup>

## Cholesterol drugs for people 75 and older

### When you need them—and when you don't

**Y**our body makes a waxy substance called cholesterol. You also get it from food. Your body needs it, but too much cholesterol in your blood can clog your arteries. This increases your risk of heart disease, heart attack, and death.

Statins are drugs that lower your cholesterol. But if you are age 75 or older and you haven't had symptoms of heart disease, statins may be a bad idea. Here's why:

#### **Adults age 75 and older may not need statins.**

Many older adults have high cholesterol. Their doctors usually prescribe statins to prevent heart disease.

But for older people, there is no clear evidence that high cholesterol leads to heart disease or death. In fact, some studies show the opposite—that older people with the lowest cholesterol levels actually have the highest risk of death.



#### **Statins have risks.**

Compared to younger adults, older adults are more likely to suffer serious side effects from using statins.

Statins can cause muscle problems, such as aches, pains, or weakness. Rarely, there can be a severe form of muscle breakdown.

In older adults, statins can also cause:

- Falls
- Memory loss and confusion
- Nausea, constipation, or diarrhea

Often, older adults take many drugs. These can interact with statins and lead to serious problems. Side effects, like muscle pain, may increase. Statins can also cause a fatal reaction when taken with heart-rhythm drugs.

Statins may increase the risk of type 2 diabetes and cataracts, as well as damage to the liver, kidneys, and nerves.

### **Weigh the risks and benefits.**

You and your doctor should look carefully at the risks and benefits of statins, especially if you are older and do not have heart disease.

Older people may not live long enough to get the important benefits from statins. You and your family should speak with your doctor about your health concerns. Are you more concerned about preventing a heart attack that might never happen? Or do you want to avoid side effects that can lead to frailty, injury, and memory problems?

### **Statins can cost a lot.**

A one-month supply of statins can cost as little as \$4, or as much as several hundred dollars, depending on the statin prescribed. You may also have to pay for extra tests to check for side effects.

### **When should older adults take statins?**

You should take statins if you have had a heart attack, stroke, or mini-stroke (transient ischemic attack, or TIA). Statins can help prevent a second heart attack or stroke.

This report is for you to use when talking with your healthcare provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

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