

Choosing Wisely®

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Cholesterol drugs for people 75 and older

When you need them—and when you don't

Your 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 diabetes, cataracts, and 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 generic statins costs from \$4 to \$220. A brand-name statin costs from \$160 to \$686. 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 help prevent a second heart attack or stroke.

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

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Advice from Consumer Reports

Steps to help prevent heart disease

A healthy lifestyle is the best way to prevent heart disease, especially for older people. Here are steps that can help.

Be active. Exercise makes your heart stronger. It opens new blood vessels so that the heart doesn't have to work so hard. It also helps keep your weight and blood pressure at healthy levels.

Try to get moderate exercise for two and a half hours a week—or 30 minutes a day. Moderate exercises include walking, swimming, cycling, dancing, and gardening.

Eat more plant foods. Eat mostly vegetables, fruit, whole grains, nuts, and beans.

- They are high in potassium and fiber, which help protect you from heart disease.
- They are low in salt.
- They don't have the kinds of fats that can clog arteries.

Replace butter with canola or olive oil. For meat, eat small portions of fish, lean meat, or poultry.

Quit smoking. Smokers are up to four times more likely to develop heart disease, compared to non-smokers. Quitting lowers your risk, even if you have smoked for a long time. After one year smoke-free, your risk is cut in half.

The best ways to help people quit are counseling or nicotine-replacement products, or both. Avoid second-hand smoke, which also causes heart disease.

Avoid stress.

Emotional stress releases hormones that can harm your heart. To relax, try yoga, massage, tai chi, or meditation. Try a warm bath, a book, or music. Or spend more time with family, friends, and pets.

