

# Should I take a Statin? A Decision Guide for Cholesterol Treatment

Should you take a statin medicine to help manage your cholesterol? You and your healthcare provider should decide together based on your personal situation. The information in this handout can help you make that decision. Use the worksheet on [page 3](#) to help you make your decision.

## What are statins?

Statins are the best type of medicine for lowering your LDL cholesterol. They work by blocking an enzyme that your body needs to make **cholesterol** [kuh-les-tuh-rohl].

Cholesterol is a soft, waxy substance that carries digested fat from your liver to the parts of your body that need fat for energy and healing.

You have 2 different types of cholesterol:

- **LDL cholesterol** can build up in the walls of your blood vessels and block the blood flow.
- **HDL cholesterol** can remove some of the LDL cholesterol from your artery walls and improve blood flow.

## How do I decide?

Read through the information on this handout and go over it with your healthcare provider. During your discussion:

- Remember that current medical research doesn't suggest a clear right or wrong answer for you.
- Be honest about your lifestyle habits and what you are willing and able to change right now.
- Talk with the people who love and support you. People who know you well can help you decide.

## Who should take statins?

Experts at the American Heart Association say that certain people should take statins to manage the balance of cholesterol in their bodies and lower their risk of having a heart attack or stroke. People who have a higher risk generally have these things in common:

- Cardiovascular disease, or a high risk of getting it
- Low HDL (good) cholesterol or a high total cholesterol level (HDL and LDL combined)
- Diabetes
- High blood pressure
- A history of smoking

Other things are also important, such as your age and sex, whether or not you have a chronic health condition, or a family history of vascular disease (build-up of cholesterol in the blood vessels).

## Benefits and risks of taking a statin

All medicines have both benefits and possible side effects. Your healthcare provider can help you know what to expect.

### Benefits of statins

- **A low dose of a statin can lower cholesterol by about one-third (30%).** Statins are considered to be the best medicines for lowering LDL cholesterol.
- **Statins lower your risk of heart attack, stroke, and other heart problems.** This is true even for people with normal cholesterol levels.
- **A statin dose that is specific to your personal health risks** appears to be more important than reaching a particular cholesterol level.

Once you start taking a statin, you'll need to keep taking it to keep these benefits. Be sure to talk with your healthcare provider if you want to stop taking it.

### Possible side effects

Most people can take statins without any problems. Very few people have serious side effects. Side effects can include:

- **Sore or aching muscles.** This is the most common side effect and it's usually not serious or very bothersome. In rare, severe cases, muscle cells can break down and may damage your kidneys if symptoms are ignored.
- **Higher blood glucose.** Patients who take statins and are at risk for type 2 diabetes may develop it sooner while taking a statin. Your healthcare provider can show you how to avoid getting type 2 diabetes.
- **Changes in liver function.** These are rare and your healthcare provider can order periodic tests to check the health of your liver.
- **Problems combining statins with other medicines.** Tell your healthcare provider about all the medicines you are taking, including prescriptions, over-the-counter medicines (like cough syrup or allergy pills) inhalers, patches, vitamin supplements, and herbal remedies.



We both have cholesterol that's in the same range, but my other risk factors are really different than my wife's. I decided to take statins and she decided not to. We're both happy.

## Other things to think about

### Lifestyle habits

Healthy lifestyle habits are the best way to lower your risk of heart attack, stroke, and other heart problems, whether or not you take statins. Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- **Activity.** Are you active for at least 150 minutes each week (about 30 minutes on most days). Are you willing and able to be more active?
- **Diet.** Do you eat mostly fruits and vegetables and heart-healthy grains? Or, do you eat out at restaurants or buy a lot of pre-packaged foods at the grocery store? Do you drink a lot of soda or alcohol? Are you willing and able to make changes in your diet?
- **Weight.** Are you at a healthy body weight? Are you willing to take steps to lose weight?
- **Tobacco.** Do you use tobacco? Have you thought about quitting? How can your healthcare provider help you quit?

### Family history

Risk of heart attack, stroke, and other heart problems is higher in some families. If one of your parents or a brother or sister has had a heart attack, stroke, or was diagnosed with cardiovascular disease before age 55 (for a man) or 65 (for a woman), your risk may be higher.

## Health conditions

Other chronic (long-term) conditions can increase your risk of heart attack, stroke, and other heart problems. This is especially true if you have not been able to manage these conditions with treatment.

These include:

- Diabetes or prediabetes
- High blood pressure
- Being overweight or obese, especially if you carry extra weight around your belly
- Chronic kidney disease
- Low HDL (good) cholesterol
- Physical inactivity

## Your risk of pregnancy

You should not take statin medicine when pregnant or breastfeeding. If there's a chance you may become pregnant, do not take statins.

## Your personal preferences

Once you have figured out your risk level, ask these questions:

- How do you feel about taking a medicine every day?
- How do you feel about taking this medicine?
- Do you have a strong feeling about whether or not you want to take it? If so, this should be part of your discussion and decision.

## Decision checklist

Consider the things you read about in this decision guide. Then, mark the boxes below that best explain how you feel. Comparing the left and right sides may help you decide.

You may WANT to take a statin if:	You may NOT WANT to take a statin if:
<b>1. Your lifestyle habits</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> You have a heart-healthy lifestyle but your LDL cholesterol is still high, so lifestyle change wouldn't help much.	<input type="checkbox"/> You have a heart-healthy lifestyle so your risk is lower.
<input type="checkbox"/> You need to make lifestyle changes, but you don't feel ready or able to make them right now.	<input type="checkbox"/> You know what lifestyle changes will help lower your risk, and you feel ready and able to start making at least one of these changes now.
<b>2. Benefits and risks of taking statins</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> You feel the potential benefits of taking statins are greater than the potential risks.	<input type="checkbox"/> You feel the potential risks of taking statins are greater than the potential benefits.
<b>3. Your other health conditions</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> You have another health condition that could increase your risk, and it's not well-controlled at this time.	<input type="checkbox"/> You do not have another chronic health condition that could increase your risk.
	<input type="checkbox"/> You do have another health condition that could increase your risk, but it's under control.
<b>4. Your family history</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> One of your parents or siblings has had a heart attack, stroke, or other signs of cardiovascular issues before age 55 (for a man) or 65 (for a woman).	<input type="checkbox"/> You do not have a family health history of stroke, heart disease, or other cardiovascular issues
<b>5. Your risk of pregnancy</b>	
<input type="checkbox"/> There is no chance you will become pregnant.	<input type="checkbox"/> You are pregnant, may become pregnant, or are nursing.
<b>6. Other reasons</b>	

