

# Cholesterol Drugs May Fight Asthma, Too

Charlene Laino

March 4, 2010 (New Orleans) — Once again, cholesterol-lowering statin drugs have been shown to be good for more than the heart.

Already linked to a reduced risk of rheumatoid arthritis, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, and cancer, statins also may help people with asthma breathe easier, researchers report.

In a 70-person study, the use of statins was associated with improvements in lung function.

Patients were also less likely to use rescue inhaler medications that provide short-acting, quick relief when symptoms flare when they were on statins than when they weren't taking the drugs.

Odelya E. Pagovich, MD, of Beth Israel Medical Center in New York, presented the findings at the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology annual meeting.

About 21 million Americans suffer from asthma, which is caused by inflammation and swelling of the airways. The inflammation, in turn, can cause excessive mucus production and narrowing of the airways, resulting in asthma symptoms such as shortness of breath, coughing, and wheezing.

It stands to reason that statins would relieve asthma symptoms, Pagovich says. In animal and lab studies, they have been shown to reduce inflammation in the lungs.

Given that up to one-third of people with asthma also have high blood cholesterol or other risk factors for heart disease and stroke that may require statin therapy, the idea that statins may relieve asthma symptoms "is extremely attractive and worthy of further study," says William Busse, MD, chair of the department of medicine at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health in Madison.

But no one should start taking statins in an attempt to ward off an asthma attack, he stresses.

Studies to date have had conflicting results, Busse says. Some research has linked statins to fewer emergency room visits and hospitalizations for asthma, but others have suggested that people with asthma who take statins have more attacks than those who don't take the cholesterol-lowering drugs.

"If it turns out that statins have this extra added benefit, that would be great," says Busse, lead author of the asthma guidelines that doctors follow when treating the disease.

## Asthma Patients Breathe Better

The new study involved 70 people, mostly women, who were prescribed either Lipitor or Zocor, both statins.

Two months before statin therapy began, participants were using a rescue inhaler an average of nine times per week.

This dropped to five times a week in the first and second months after statin treatment started.

"With the statin therapy, most people also improved class," Pagovich says.

After a month of treatment with statins, only 14% of patients were classified as having severe persistent asthma, down from 17% before treatment began. Only 44% had moderate persistent asthma vs. 55% before statin treatment started.

A total of 42% of patients were classified as having mild asthma, compared with 30% before statin treatment began.

"The capacity of the lung to breathe in and out also improved in the months after statin treatment was initiated," Pagovich says.

The dose of statin didn't affect the results, she says. The researchers didn't tease out whether one type of statin drug had more potent asthma-fighting properties than another. Other statin drugs include Crestor, Pravachol, Mevacor, and Lescol.

#### SOURCES:

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## **American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology (AAAAI) 2010 Annual Meeting**

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