

CTSU, University of Oxford

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Wider statin use in healthy people could save 2,000 lives a year in the UK

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The largest and most reliable study ever to examine the effect of statins has found them to reduce the risk of heart attacks, strokes and premature deaths among a wide range of apparently healthy people. The benefits greatly exceed any known risks associated with taking these drugs.

The study was a meta-analysis of 27 randomised controlled trials coordinated by the Cholesterol Treatment Trialists' Collaboration (at the Universities of Oxford, UK, and Sydney, Australia). It found that, even in healthy people, reducing the levels of low-density lipoprotein (or "bad") cholesterol in the blood with a statin cut the risk of heart attacks, strokes and operations to unblock arteries by one third or more. Healthy people who were given a statin in the trials also had lower overall death rates than those who were given the placebo (dummy) tablet. The study, published online today at www.thelancet.com, was funded by the UK Medical Research Council, the British Heart Foundation, and the National Health and Medical Research Council (Australia).

Dr Borislava Mihaylova, a Senior Health Economist at the University of Oxford, and lead author of the report, said: "In the UK, current practice is generally to give people a statin only if they have had or are considered to be at 'high risk' of having a heart attack or a stroke. This study shows that the benefits of statins extend to a much lower-risk group of people than previously thought." Due to its careful scrutiny of the details of each trial, the meta-analysis was able to allay previous concerns that the benefits of statins in healthy people might be of similar magnitude to their hazards.

Professor Colin Baigent, the Medical Research Council scientist who coordinated the Oxford team based at the Clinical Trial Service Unit, said: "It is not just about treating raised cholesterol after middle-age. The benefits of statins in people who are currently healthy, but are for some reason at increased risk of a heart attack or stroke, are substantial, and much greater than any of the known risks.

"People who are at increased risk, perhaps because they are overweight, or smoke, or have high blood pressure, would be better off with lower cholesterol, even if their cholesterol is not

considered to be particularly high.” Professor Baigent believes that the routine use of statins among such people would translate each year into 10,000 fewer major vascular events in the UK alone, including 2,000 fewer deaths.

Statins are the most widely prescribed drug in the UK, with about 61 million prescriptions in England alone in 2011. The results from this study, suggest that many more people would benefit from taking a statin. Professor Sir Rory Collins, British Heart Foundation Professor of Medicine and Epidemiology at the University of Oxford, and co-principal investigator of the project, concluded: “Statins are one of the most effective therapies for the prevention of heart attacks and strokes. This study has shown that these benefits extend to lower-risk people and suggests that existing treatment guidelines may need to be reconsidered.”

Heart and circulatory disease accounts for more than one in three deaths in the UK each year, about 191,000 people. Many other people suffer the life-changing consequences of major surgery or disability following a heart attack or stroke. About half of all such heart attacks occur in people who have no previous history of heart disease, so measures to prevent these must be targeted at seemingly healthy people.