



WEST YORKSHIRE HEALTHY HEARTS PROJECT

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

For new statin prescription

1. What are statins?

Statins are a type of medication used to lower the level of cholesterol in the blood and protect the insides of the artery walls. High levels of cholesterol can lead to fatty deposits building up in your arteries which increases the risk of cardiovascular disease and can lead to angina, heart attack and stroke.

2. Are statins safe?

Statins are one of the most well researched types of medicine, with studies repeatedly showing very strong evidence that they are a safe way to help prevent heart disease. In fact, statins, if taken regularly over a long period, reduce the risk of stroke and heart attack by up to a third. Taking statins helps your body reduce the amount of 'bad cholesterol' in your body. Cholesterol is a fatty substance that's mainly created by our own livers, though it's also found in some of the foods we eat, and it's vital for maintaining a healthy body.

3. Are there any other side effects?

Side effects are rare. Even one of the more common side effects, muscle pain, is rare. In a typical year, only one in 500 patients would be affected. In very rare cases, people may experience significant muscle pain caused by rhabdomyolysis. If you are getting bad side effects, contact your GP, who can change your statin or dose.

A research study suggested that in very rare cases statins may increase your risk of developing type 2 diabetes, but still resulted in clear overall benefit by reducing the risk of heart attacks and strokes. However, statins are among the safest and the most studied medications available today. If you do experience side effects, or if your side effects change or become worse, tell your GP.

Statins target the liver cells where cholesterol is made. Before you start taking statins, you might have a blood test to check how well your liver works. Your doctor may request that you have a follow-up blood test a few months later. If your liver is affected, your doctor may want to reduce your dose or change your statin to another kind of medication that lowers your cholesterol.

4. What is cholesterol?

Cholesterol is a fatty substance found in your blood. If you have too much cholesterol in your blood, it can increase your risk of heart disease, heart attack and stroke. If you have been prescribed statins is to help you lower your cholesterol levels. Statins can reduce this risk by up to a third if taken properly and at the right dose.



Cholesterol is carried in your blood by proteins. When the two combines, they're called lipoproteins.

The two main types of lipoprotein are:

- **high-density lipoprotein (HDL)** carries cholesterol away from the cells and back to the liver, where it's broken down or passed out of the body as a waste product. For this reason, HDL is referred to as good cholesterol, and higher levels are better.
- **low-density lipoprotein (LDL)** carries cholesterol to the cells that need it, but if there's too much cholesterol for the cells to use, it can build up in the artery walls, leading to disease of the arteries. For this reason, LDL is known as bad cholesterol.

The amount of cholesterol in the blood (both HDL and LDL) can be measured with a blood test.

5. Why do I need to lower my cholesterol?

Cholesterol is essential for your body to work well, but too much 'bad cholesterol' (called low-density lipoprotein or LDL) is unhealthy. Statins reduce the amount of 'bad cholesterol' your body makes.

High levels of 'bad cholesterol' in your blood can lead to fatty deposits building up in your arteries. This can increase your risk of developing cardiovascular disease, which includes conditions such as coronary heart disease (leading to angina and heart attack) and stroke.

Your body will always make cholesterol so if you stop taking a statin, it's likely your cholesterol levels will rise. If you are prescribed a statin, you need to take it every day. Statins are most beneficial when you take them on a long-term basis.

6. Is there an ideal target for my cholesterol?

There are several recommendations on the optimal cholesterol levels, and this can cause confusion and concern to people if they do not achieve targets. Ideally total cholesterol should be less than 4mmol/L. However, the most important thing to monitor when you are prescribed a statin is that you are taking it and your high level of cholesterol is decreasing. A big cause of patients not having a reduction in their cholesterol levels is often not remembering to take their statin medication regularly, or not taking it at all. Statins work best if taken long term.

For further information on cholesterol levels see

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/high-cholesterol/cholesterol-levels/>

7. I am already on lots of medication, how will statin affect the other medication I take?

Your doctor has already checked the records carefully for a list of medications which can interact significantly with statins and you are not on any of these. If you have any concerns, please speak to your pharmacist in the first instance and if necessary, afterwards you may be directed to speak to your GP or practice nurse.



8. What else can help me to lower my cholesterol?

You can also lower your cholesterol by:

- ✓ eating a healthy, balanced diet
- ✓ maintaining a healthy weight, BMI and waist circumference
- ✓ doing regular physical activity

9. Where can I find out more information?

You can find out more information about statins and why it is important to lower bad cholesterol on the West Yorkshire and Harrogate Healthy Hearts website <https://www.westyorkshireandharrogatehealthyhearts.co.uk/> that also includes links to other useful sources such as NHS Choices, Heart UK, Blood Pressure UK, British Heart Foundation etc.

The website provides some useful information and details on healthy lifestyle including tips on exercise and healthy eating.

If you have further questions about statins and a healthy lifestyle, you can also talk to your pharmacist, practice nurse or GP.

Your local pharmacy can provide some useful information about what statins are and answer any basic questions. You can find details of your local community pharmacies on the West Yorkshire and Harrogate Healthy Hearts website or in the Yellow Pages.

10. Why is there so much bad press about statins?

It's not possible to say for certain why the media sometimes suggest statins are bad. Statins are one of the most well researched types of medicine, with studies repeatedly showing very strong evidence that they are a safe way to help prevent heart disease and strokes. Side effects are rare. Even one of the more common side effects, muscle pain, is rare. If you have any concerns you speak to your GP, nurse or pharmacist.

11. I do not want to take a statin as I have heard they are illegal

Statins are not illegal. Statins have to be rigorously tested for safety and effectiveness before they are approved and licenced in the U.K.

12. My GP wants to put me on a statin – do I have a choice?

It is extremely important that both you and your GP (or healthcare professional) have an honest discussion about any medication and why it is being suggested. You should ensure you are clear on the benefits and risks and that you understand what is being said. You should never be frightened to ask questions. Initiatives such as **Me & My Medicines** can help you with these conversations. To find out more about this initiative please visit <https://meandmymedicines.org.uk/>

13. My GP doesn't have time to speak to me for very long – how will I be able to ask questions about my statins?

Sadly, GPs are under a lot of pressure and see huge numbers of patients every day, which may mean that they do not always get the time to explain everything in as much detail as they would like. However, they will be able to advise you about the best person to speak to or where to find more information. Many health professionals in practices, such as nurses and



pharmacists will be able to talk to you about statins, cholesterol and what your risk of heart attack and stroke is. If you have any questions, please ensure you ask if you can speak to another person. Our website provides you with more information and links to other reliable sources such as NHS Choice, British Heart Foundation, Heart UK etc

14. Aren't the things I eat and my lifestyle better ways to reduce my cholesterol?

Whilst diet, exercise, smoking and being a healthy weight are all important factors to help reduce bad cholesterol – sometimes the combination of both a healthy lifestyle and statin medication are equally important and the most effective way to get bad cholesterol under control and to safe levels.

15. I don't know if my cholesterol is high – how do I find out?

If you're in the 40-74 age group without a pre-existing condition, you can expect to receive a letter from your GP or local authority inviting you for a free NHS Health Check every five years. The NHS Health Check is a free check-up of your overall health. It can tell you whether you're at higher risk of getting certain health problems. One of the tests they do is check your cholesterol

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-health-check/nhs-health-check/>

If you are not aged between 40-74 and your GP has not spoken to you about your cholesterol and you are still worried, for example if you know you have a family history of high cholesterol, speak to your GP (or healthcare professional).

16. Do I have to avoid certain foods if I am on a statin?

You can check the patient information leaflets that is supplied with your medications. If you have further questions, you can check with your pharmacist. If you're taking simvastatin, avoid grapefruit and grapefruit juice as they can increase your risk of side effects. If you're taking atorvastatin, the occasional glass of grapefruit juice is thought to be fine, but large amounts are best avoided (more than 1.2 litres per day).

Currently, healthcare professionals advise it is safe to drink grapefruit juice and eat grapefruit if you're taking other types of statins.