

A common cholesterol drug fights cataracts, too

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Statins, a class of drugs used to lower cholesterol levels, have been successfully fighting heart disease for years. A new study from Tel Aviv University has now found that the same drugs cut the risks of cataracts in men by almost 40%.

"Doctors have known for some time that there is some sort of preventative effect that statins have against cataracts," says Dr. Gabriel Chodick of the Department of Epidemiology and Preventive Medicine at the Sackler Faculty of Medicine at Tel Aviv University, who led the study. "It seems that they protect the eye from inflammation and ocular [nerve cells](#) from a process of oxidization. But ours is the first study to show such a strong association in such a large population."

The study covered over 180,000 patients between the years of 1998 and 2007 and was published in the February 2010 issue of the [Annals of Epidemiology](#).

From the heart to the head

Dr. Chodick and his colleague Dr. Varda Shalev found that men aged 45 to 54 who took the statins daily to lower their cholesterol levels also lowered their chances of developing cataracts by 38%. For women of about the same age, the risk for cataracts was also cut dramatically, by about 18%.

Dr. Chodick has been studying the health benefits of statins for years. One of his recent studies, featured as part of a Time magazine cover story, showed that statins can reduce a person's chance of dying from all combined diseases and conditions by 40% -- something in the medical community called "all-cause mortality."

"People who persistently take statins have tremendously reduced chances of [premature death](#) by disease. We began to think that statins, which are proven to prevent cardiovascular disease, may do other good things in the body as well. We started investigating cataracts to show statins' effects in a more statistical manner," says Dr. Chodick.

A statin a day...

"Statins are not being taken consistently by patients, and only about 10% of those who get these prescriptions actually end up taking them. Once you start, it's important to continue taking them to avoid cardiovascular problems," Dr. Chodick warns. "But now we have even more good reasons to keep taking statins — like an apple a day. People who begin taking them in their 40s to early 60s can reap a number of benefits, including better protection against cataracts."

A cataract is a type of clouding that develops in the lens of the eye, leading to varying degrees of sight impairment. It typically progresses slowly so that the sufferer may not even be aware of the problem. If left untreated, a cataract can lead to blindness. In the U.S., cataracts affect about 60% of both men and women over the age of 60. About 1.5 million cataract surgeries are performed in the U.S. each year, and visual disabilities associated with cataracts lead to over 8 million physician office visits a year.

"We believe that the regular use of statins for men and women under the age of 75 can significantly protect them against cataracts," Dr. Chodick

concludes. Whether people who are not at risk for heart attacks should take them as a [cataract](#) preventative alone has not been determined. But before long we may be taking a daily [statin](#) pill along with our daily vitamin tablet, Dr. Chodick believes.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

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