

Study suggests link between cholesterol drugs and lower risk of cancer death

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Women who take statins – drugs that lower cholesterol levels – seem to have a lower risk of dying from cancer, according to results of a large study presented at a US conference.

But UK experts cautioned that randomised trials were needed to confirm whether the findings were directly due to the drugs' effects.

The 15-year study followed almost 150,000 post-menopausal [women](#) aged between 50 and 79.

More than 3,100 women died of [cancer](#) over that time.

Those who reported taking the cholesterol-lowering drugs were less likely to have died of cancer than those who were not taking the drugs.

The findings, reported at the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) annual conference in Chicago, showed lower [death rates](#) among those taking [statins](#) for several common cancers including breast, bowel and ovarian cancers.

But lung cancer death rates did not seem to be affected, contrary to previous research.

When all cancers were taken into account, patients taking the statins were 20 per cent less likely to die of cancer during the course of the study.

The study was designed to take into account other factors that affect cancer risk, such as family history, age, BMI and smoking rates.

But Dr Richard Roope, Cancer Research UK's GP expert, said the research "doesn't prove that post-menopausal women should take statins to lower their risk of dying from cancer.

"We don't know for sure if the link shown between a decreased risk of dying from cancer, and statin use, is due to the drugs themselves, or some other reason," he added.

Dr Ange Wang of the Stanford University School of Medicine, who led the study, said her team was "very excited" by the results, but agreed that the study did not prove statins were the reason why people were less likely to die from cancer, and that more research was needed.

"I think it should be a priority given how common statins are and how much their use has expanded, and how prevalent cancer is," she said.

Previous research has suggested that cholesterol - which the drugs target - helps cancer to spread.

This idea was supported by the new findings, which found no differences in the rate women developed cancer among the different groups on the study – only between those who subsequently died of the disease.

Further studies – including the Cancer Research UK-funded LungStar trial - are exploring whether the drugs could help treat the disease.

But Dr Roope cautioned, "more research is needed before we can say whether it would be beneficial for more women to take statins."

More information: "Statin use and all-cancer mortality: Prospective results from the Women's Health Initiative."

abstracts.asco.org/156/AbstView_156_143458.html

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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