

92 Deaths Linked to Cholesterol Lowering Statin Drugs

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British government figures released last week show that 92 deaths have been linked to the statin drugs developed to lower cholesterol.

It is believed that the death toll could be higher because doctors are reluctant to blame drugs they prescribe for harming patients.

Experts are calling for a complete safety review of heart drugs taken by millions of Britons.

More than 37 of the deaths were attributed to **Zocor**.

Lipitor, made by Pfizer, was associated with 36 of the deaths.

Three other leading statin brands — Novartis's Lescol, BMS's Lipostat and AstraZeneca's Crestor — have been associated with 19 deaths.

As well as the deaths there have also been reports of **7,000 side effects** reported to the Department of Health by doctors, including **kidney and liver damage and muscle weakness**.

There are an estimated 4 million people taking the drugs, almost a third more than a year ago.

Cholesterol Confusion Among the Researchers

Anxiety about overuse of the drugs is coupled with a growing body of research suggesting the connection between cholesterol levels and health is more complex than previously thought.

A number of investigations have discovered that people with **higher amounts of cholesterol live longer than those with lower levels**.

Despite growing evidence that cholesterol is not the primary cause of heart disease, the pharmaceutical industry still is aggressively marketing statins.

The Death of a Tennis Player

Next month an inquest is to take place into the death of Ivor Meacher, 71, a fit former tennis coach from Okehampton, Devon, who became ill and died within weeks of being prescribed a statin for an irregular heartbeat.

Research by his daughter, Jay Ballard, has produced what she says is irrefutable evidence that his death was caused by the drug atorvastatin, manufactured by Pfizer and marketed in Britain as Lipitor.

Eventually she contacted Andrew Herxheimer, emeritus fellow of the United Kingdom Cochrane Centre and co-founder of DIPEX (an electronic database of patients' experiences) in Oxford. He has filed a yellow card on her behalf.

Herxheimer, however, has questioned the heavy promotion of the drugs. "We don't know what other things statins do apart from reducing lipids in the liver," he said.

The Most Severe Side Effect

The most severe adverse effect of statins is called **rhabdomyolysis**, where muscle is "dissolved" and the breakdown products block the kidneys, with fatal consequences.

The Food and Drug Administration, which licenses medications in America, has been forced to review the safety of one statin in particular: Crestor.

This came after David Graham, the FDA's leading drug safety expert, turned whistleblower last autumn to raise concerns about levels of kidney damage.

Beatrice Golomb, a scientist at the University of California in San Diego, has been sponsored by the National Institutes of Health to investigate the effects of statins on mental function in 1,000 patients. It is understood she has recorded a number of problems ranging from **memory lapses to changes in personality**.

Last year a study of almost 150,000 people in Austria found that those with the **lowest cholesterol** were more likely to **die of cancer**.

Andrew Clark, a cardiologist at Castle Hill hospital in Hull, was the co-author of an international study of 417 heart failure patients that showed those with **highest cholesterol levels actually lived longer**.

The Drug and Therapeutics Bulletin, which advises doctors on drug safety, is concerned about the marketing of statins and is planning a review of the sale of Zocor over the counter. "We are concerned there is no research data on the efficacy of the recommended dose, and there is also a potentially **lethal effect if you drink grapefruit juice while taking it**," said its editor, Ike Iheanacho. Another statin drug called **Lipobay** was withdrawn in 2001 after unacceptably high death rates among patients.

Mark Harvey, a solicitor who represented more than 50 British patients who claimed they had suffered adverse effects from taking it, said last week: "There is an increasing crisis of confidence in public authorities. They keep telling us they are looking after us, but we keep having drugs taken off the market after too many people have been damaged by them."