

Older Men Who Take Cholesterol-Lowering Drugs Don't Exercise Enough, Says Study

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The researchers evaluated men in the study for almost seven years after initial baseline studies were done, and compared changes in physical activity among users and non-users of statins. In parts of the experiments, men wore accelerometers for a week to track their level of activity by the minute.

The study, supported by the National Institutes of Health and the Medical Research Foundation of Oregon, evaluated 3,071 community-living men, age 65 or older, from six geographic regions in the U.S.

The researchers found that men who took statins averaged about 40 minutes less of moderate physical activity over a one-week period, compared with those who weren't taking the medication. This equates to the loss of 150 minutes a week of slow-paced walking, according to the researchers.

Muscle Pain, Fatigue from Statins

About one-third of older Americans take statins to reduce their cholesterol levels.

The findings, published in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, did not identify why men who took statins exercised less. The researchers suggest that muscle pain, which is sometimes a side effect of statin use, as well as disruption of the mitochondrial function in cells, which could cause fatigue and muscle weakness, may be to blame. According to the researchers, muscle pain is found in five to 30 percent of people who take statins.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that older adults get at least two hours and 30 minutes (150 minutes) of moderate-intensity aerobic activity (such as brisk walking) every week, and muscle-strengthening activities that work all major muscle groups (legs, hips, back, abdomen, chest, shoulders, and arms) on two or more days a week.

Physical Activity in Older Adults Has Health Benefits

David Lee, an assistant professor in the Oregon State University/Oregon Health & Science University College of Pharmacy and the lead author of the study, said in a press statement that physical activity in older adults helps to maintain a proper weight, physical strength and function, as well as prevents cardiovascular disease.

Lee continued, "We're trying to find ways to get older adults to exercise more, not less. It's a fairly serious concern if use of statins is doing something that makes people less likely to exercise."

"For an older population that's already pretty sedentary, that's a significant amount less exercise," Lee said, adding, "Even moderate amounts of exercise can make a big difference."

The study also found the largest drop in physical activity was seen in new statin users. An increase in sedentary behavior, which is associated with all-cause mortality, and also death from cardiovascular disease, was also observed in statin users.

Lee concluded, "We should be aware of a possible decrease in physical activity among people taking a statin. This could decrease the benefit of the medication. If someone is already weak, frail, or sedentary, they may want to consider this issue, and consult with their doctor to determine if statin use is still appropriate." The researchers noted that the study was done with older men, and generalization of the findings to older women may not be appropriate.

An Expert Weighs In

Commenting on the study's findings, nutritionist Franci Cohen, M.S., told Healthline that staying active is important for both men and women of any age, but particularly for older men taking statin drugs. "Older men are at an increased risk for cardiovascular disease, and the other ailments that accompany and/or lead up to it (such as high cholesterol and blood pressure), which is why many men are taking cholesterol-lowering statin drugs," said Cohen.

Cohen continued, "If these men are taking the statins to lower cholesterol, but by taking the drugs are now becoming less active, which will in turn raise cholesterol levels, then, as the study suggests, taking the drugs may be counterproductive, as the benefits do not outweigh the risks. It may be wiser to take something like Chinese red yeast—proven to substantially lower cholesterol levels—and to exercise more to lower cholesterol levels safely and effectively."