

NEWS

Cholesterol drugs lower stroke risk, study finds

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Certain cholesterol-lowering drugs that help prevent heart attacks also may thwart the most common type of stroke, researchers report in today's issue of the Archives of Internal Medicine.

Drugs such as Zocor and Pravachol reduced the risk of stroke by an estimated 27 percent, according to a new analysis of 12 studies involving 19,518 patients with high cholesterol.

Only recently have researchers appreciated the role of cholesterol-clogged arteries in causing strokes, said the study's lead author, Dr. John Robert Crouse III of Bowman Gray School of Medicine in Winston-Salem, N.C. It has long been known that such clogged arteries cause heart attacks.

Strokes are the primary cause of long-term disability in the United States, according to the American Heart Association. Strokes kill 150,000 Americans each year, making it the third-leading cause of death behind heart disease and cancer.

Reductase inhibitors, such as Zocor and Pravachol, limit the

amount of cholesterol the body produces, so doctors should give the drug only to patients with elevated cholesterol levels, Crouse said.

Among people taking the drugs, the researchers found a 15 percent drop in strokes among participants who had not had heart attacks and a 31 percent drop among heart attack survivors.

Reductase inhibitors may avert strokes by cleaning arteries, preventing their deterioration or forestalling heart attacks, researchers said. After a heart attack, a blood clot can travel to the brain and cause a stroke.

Bowman Gray researchers—including Crouse, Robert Patrick Byington, Helena Maria Hoen and Curt Daniel Furberg—analyzed 12 studies from the mid-1980s to 1996.

Experts generally believe reductase inhibitors, marketed since the early 1980s, can reduce LDL, the so-called bad cholesterol, by 30 percent to 40 percent, compared with other drugs, which reduce LDL by 10 percent to 12 percent. Lowering LDL is now believed to be the most important way to modify cholesterol levels and prevent disease.