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## Millions Untreated for High Cholesterol, but Are Drugs the Answer?

The news this week from the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** that as many as 48 million U.S. adults have high levels of bad cholesterol, and aren't doing enough to control it, left out one conspicuous controversy: Should lots more Americans be taking statin drugs, or would it be a huge waste of money?

Statins like Crestor and Lipitor lower cholesterol in the blood by decreasing cholesterol synthesis in the liver. Since plaques in coronary arteries are mostly composed of

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cholesterol, lowering cholesterol cuts the rate of formation of plaque, and in some cases, even shrinks it.

For people with diagnosed heart disease, statins are mainstream, non-controversial medical treatment. But for patients who just have high cholesterol, but no known heart disease yet, the drugs have modest if any benefit. And this is the group that is the main target of drug manufacturers for expanding sales of statins.

A **cautionary statement** about the questionable role of statin drugs in "primary prevention" of heart disease was recently released by the British-based Cochrane Collaboration, which conducts rigorous reviews of medical studies to see how the evidence measures up.

The authors of the new Cochrane review criticized much of the studies sponsored by drug manufacturers for leaving out key data. They concluded:

Only limited evidence showed that primary prevention with statins may be cost effective and improve patient quality of life. Caution should be taken in prescribing statins for primary prevention among people at low cardiovascular risk.

Doctors who are slow to turn healthy people into medical patients are careful about whom they prescribe statins for. For example, Dr. Robert Lemmon, a South Carolina family practice doctor and medical blogger, **wrote an analysis** of the published studies and concluded that statins were "overrated" and did not much help people who don't have heart disease. Noting that other cautious reviewers had reached the same

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conclusion, even though it cuts against drug manufacturer hype, he wrote: "This post is blasphemy. Fortunately I am in good company."

The CDC report also talks about improving diet and exercise habits as strategies to cut cholesterol. That can work in individuals very well, but as a public health strategy, education campaigns also fall short in making any notable impact. That's why public health advocates reach for systemic changes that would expose people to less temptation by strategies such as bans on use of certain bad fats in restaurants and fast food manufacturers. A provocative article on this topic was published in [PLoS Medicine](#).

Article first published as [Government Reports Millions of Americans Have Untreated High Cholesterol — But What Treatment Works?](#) on Technorati.

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