

# A secondary benefit?

## ■ New report says cholesterol drug may help reduce cataracts

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Statins, the popular cholesterol-lowering drugs taken by nearly 20 million people in the United States, may reduce the risk of cataracts, researchers report today.

The class of drugs includes many well-known brands: Zocor, Pravachol, Lipitor, Crestor and Mevacor. Researchers at the University of Wisconsin in Madison found that adults, mostly in their 60s, were 45 percent less likely to develop the type of cataract associated with aging if they took statins.

"We believe that it is the antioxidant properties of statins that are showing a benefit," said Kris-

tine Lee, a researcher in the Beaver Dam Eye Study, an ongoing investigation about eye health involving residents of a Wisconsin town by that name. "We believe there needs to be a clinical trial to further investigate the role of statins. But it is entirely possible that people on the drugs have a reduced incidence of cataracts for a number of reasons."

Antioxidants, she said, can prevent damage by the renegade form of oxygen molecules called free radicals, which can cause a range of tissue damage.

Cataracts are a clouding of the eye's crystalline lens, a condition that becomes virtually inevitable as people age. Cataracts are a leading cause of vision impairment in the elderly.

But Dr. Kenneth Rosenthal, an expert in the eye condition, scoffed at the results. "A few

years ago it was thought that statins caused cataracts," he said. The doctor, who has a practice in Great Neck and also holds academic appointments in ophthalmology at New York University and the University of Utah, added, "I wouldn't advise patients to take statins to prevent cataracts."

The Beaver Dam study, which followed 1,299 residents for five years, found that nuclear cataracts, which affect the core of the lens and are most often associated with aging, were far less likely in statin users. These cataracts were diagnosed in 200 Beaver Dam residents, Lee said, but they were more likely to occur in people who did not take the drugs. She said participants took a range of statins, some for only two days, others for as long as 10 years, and no one brand proved better than another. Only 12

percent of participants on statins developed nuclear cataracts compared with 17 percent of non-statin users who developed them.

The findings, published in today's Journal of the American Medical Association, add yet another angle to a debate that has smoldered in the medical community for years. Arguments have gone back and forth over the relationship between statins and cataracts.

"I think that the jury is still out," Rosenthal said, despite the new results. He said there is no clear-cut cause-and-effect evidence in the study that statins actually caused cataract reduction.

People in their 60s, he said, take a number of prescription and non-prescription medications. One or perhaps a combination of the drugs could produce a synergistic effect.

## Melanoma risk higher for blacks and Hispanics

Melanoma may be more common in whites, but the most serious form of skin cancer is deadlier in blacks and Hispanics because it is more likely to go undetected, researchers report. Blacks are more than three times as likely as whites to be diagnosed with melanoma after it has reached a late stage, and Hispanics are nearly twice as likely, according to a University of Miami study released Monday. Late diagnosis of melanoma generally significantly reduces the chances for survival. The survival rate for those with early detection is about 99 percent, according to the National Cancer Institute. With later detection, the survival rate falls to between 15 and 65 percent, depending on how far the disease has spread, The Associated Press reports.

## Second woman shuttle leader

Air Force Col. Pamela Ann Melroy will become the second woman to command a space shuttle.

## Getting ready

Students cover their heads as they prepare to leave their classroom during an earthquake drill yesterday in Marikina City, east of Manila, Philippines.

