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CANCER

Finding the Best
Cancer Treatment

Statins – The Wonder Drugs and Their Side Effects

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It's been an up and down month for statins, a class of widely touted "wonder drugs" that have already sprinted to the top of the best-seller list based on their ability to lower cholesterol and thus reduce the risk of heart disease. Now preliminary studies suggest that they may be effective against an array of cancers as well, though that is far from proved.

The hitch is lingering safety concerns, highlighted by a recent study showing that the most powerful drug in the class had a much higher rate of serious adverse reports than did its competitors.

The statins are undeniably good at lowering cholesterol, and studies published early this year showed that they were also effective in reducing levels of a protein involved in inflammation, a separate risk factor in heart disease. Because inflammation appears to be at the root of many diseases, The Harvard Health Letter recently suggested that statins may eventually be used to treat conditions like Alzheimer's, multiple sclerosis and rheumatoid arthritis. Studies published or presented this month suggested that statins may reduce the risks of cancers affecting the colon, breast and other organs. Rigorous controlled trials are clearly needed.

One issue to watch is safety. Statins, in rare cases, can cause life-threatening kidney damage, liver inflammation and fatal muscle breakdown, a side effect that drove Baycol from the market in 2001. This week a new study found that Crestor, the newest and strongest statin, had a much higher rate of adverse injury reports than did three rival statins. The results caused some consumer advocates to call again for Crestor's removal from the market.

Regulators and heart experts insist that Crestor and the other statins are quite safe, but millions of consumers will need to keep their guard up to make sure that unbridled enthusiasm for these drugs does not obscure any problems.