

Statin drugs may protect smokers' lungs –study

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) – Statin drugs, which have become the world's No. 1 selling drugs by cutting cholesterol and the risk of heart attacks and stroke, may also slow the lung damage done by smoking, U.S. researchers said on Monday.

Current and former smokers who used statins lost less of their lung function than those who did not, researchers told a meeting of the American College of Chest Physicians.

"Until now, no medication has shown to slow smoking–induced lung damage," said Dr. Walid Younis of the University of Oklahoma Medical Center, who led the study.

"Our study is the first to show that statins may decrease the decline in lung function in smokers and former smokers, and, therefore, prevent millions from developing debilitating diseases that could eventually lead to death."

Younis and colleagues studied 182 current smokers and 303 former smokers who were on average in their mid–60s.

They had all undergone at least two pulmonary function tests between 18 and 30 months apart. Of the 485 patients, 319 had obstructive lung disease, 99 had restrictive lung disease, and 67 had normal lung function.

And 238 had been taking statin drugs.

Breathing capacity tests showed that patients not taking statins lost more on two measures of lung function –– forced expiratory volume in 1 second or FEV1 and forced vital capacity or FVC.

Statin patients saw FEV1 fall by 2.5 percent over the 18–to–30–month period, while those not taking the drugs lost an average of 12.8 percent.

For FVC, statin patients lost 1.3 percent of capacity compared with 10.3 percent loss in the others.

STAYING OUT OF THE HOSPITAL

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Patients with obstructive lung disease who took statins were 35 percent less likely to visit the emergency room or to be admitted to the hospital.

It is not entirely clear how statin drugs work, but they appear to affect inflammation and to benefit the lining of blood vessels and capillaries, called the epithelium.

"It is conceivable that long-term statin therapy could be used in smokers and former smokers to prevent and slow the progression of lung diseases," Younis said.

But he said smokers still need to quit.

"Even though statins may help with lung function, they have no effect on preventing a patient from the major smoking-related killer, which is lung cancer. Therefore, smokers should never lose their incentive to quit smoking."

A second study presented at the same conference confirmed other studies that have shown that