**At-risk heart patients stopped taking statins because of press controversy, study found**

* **3**SHARES
* [COMMENTS](http://www.mirror.co.uk/lifestyle/health/risk-heart-patients-stopped-taking-8305310#comments-section)

**BY**ELLA PICKOVER

* 23:30, 28 JUN 2016
* **UPDATED**13:53, 19 AUG 2016

Researchers say this means around 2,000 people may suffer a cardiovascular event and blame journals which have “an axes to grind”

Bottom of Form

Controversy about [**statin drugs**](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/medicine) led to over 200,000 patients stopping their treatment over a six-month period, a study found.

As a result, around 2,000 people may suffer a cardiovascular event such as a heart or a [**stroke**](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/stroke), experts said.

Study author Prof Liam Smeeth, from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said: “Health stories in the mainstream media can have an important, real-world impact.”

In October 2013, two articles in [**the British Medical Journal**](http://www.mirror.co.uk/all-about/british-medical-journal) (BMJ) questioned the value of extending the use of statins to healthy people at low risk of heart disease.

Then in February 2014 reporting on the issue rocketed after the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (Nice) launched draft guidance suggesting larger proportions of the population should be prescribed the drugs in a bid to prevent cases of heart disease, heart attacks and strokes.

The next month, leading medical academic Professor Sir Rory Collins criticised articles in the BMJ.

**The speculation could have increased some patients’ heart attack risk, say experts** (Photo: Getty)

Researchers looked at how this period of public debate affected the likelihood of patients taking statins.

They found that among patients taking the drug because they were deemed at high risk of developing disease there was a 12% increased likelihood of stopping statins in the six months following the period of public scrutiny.

And among patients taking statins for existing heart disease, there was an 11% likelihood they would stop, the study, published in the BMJ, found.

Overall, they estimated this equates to 219,000 people who stopped taking statins - which could lead to over 2,000 extra cardiovascular events in the next 10 years.

Dr Fiona Godlee, editor in chief of The BMJ said: "It seems to me absolutely right that there is public debate about the benefits and harms of treatments.

"Patients may now be better aware of several things. First, that we have far less good information on the side effects of statins than on their benefits. Secondly, that for some people, especially those at lower risk of heart disease, the survival benefit from statins may not outweigh the negatives of taking a drug every day.

"And finally that the complete trial data on statins are not available for independent scrutiny. This should shock people. It continues to shock me."

**The BMJ says it is important patients are well informed**

But the medical director of the British Heart Foundation (BHF) suggested that The BMJ published controversial views to sell copies.

Professor Peter Weissberg said: “Over the last decade or so we have seen a shift in the way medical journals behave.

“Twenty to 25 years ago all of the main medical journals were wholly objective, they would publish data, they would publish objective editorials that look at the balance.

“We now know that several of the leading medical journals have now got axes to grind. The BMJ for example have made it no secret that they do not like the medicalisation of the normal population, not just when it comes to statins but pregnant women and all sorts of walks of life, in the aged, in terminal care and the like.”

He added: “They sell copy best by creating a bit of controversy and will often use opinions of people who are well outside two standard deviations from the mean of medical opinion. Of course if they are quoted as a leader in a prominent medical journal, that gets a huge amount of traction.”

Meanwhile a separate study suggested that some GPs have a "lack of confidence" when responding to patients’ concerns about the drugs.

The study, conducted by the Picker Institute on behalf of the BHF, conducted three focus groups with GPs as well as an online poll of family doctors and cardiologists.

The authors wrote: “GPs in the focus groups reported a lack of confidence when responding to patients’ concerns about statins. They emphasized that they were generalists, not specialists, and that they struggled to keep up to date on the constantly changing landscape of research.”

But 37% of the 625 GPs who responded to the online poll said they were “very confident” in understanding the risks and benefits of statins, three in five said they were “fairly confident”, and 3% said they were not confident.