Statin treatment and reduced risk of pneumonia in patients with diabetes

E M W van de Garde, E Hak, P C Souverein, A W Hoes, J M M van den Bosch, H G M Leufkens

Background: Recent prognostic studies have shown that previous treatment with statins is associated with a better outcome in patients admitted to hospital with pneumonia. Because of an increased risk of pneumonia in patients with diabetes, we assessed the effects of statin use on the occurrence of pneumonia in adult diabetic patients.

Methods: All patients with a diagnosis of diabetes (types 1 and 2) enlisted in the UK General Practice Research Database between 1 June 1987 and 21 January 2001 were included. A case-control study was performed with cases defined as patients with a first recorded diagnosis of pneumonia. For each case up to four controls were matched by age, sex, practice, and index date. Patients were classified as current users when the index date was between the start and end date of statin treatment. Conditional multiple logistic regression analysis was used to estimate the strength of the association between statin treatment and the occurrence of pneumonia.

Results: Statins were used in 1.1% of 4719 cases and in 2.1% of 15 322 matched controls (crude odds ratio (OR) 0.51, 95% CI 0.37 to 0.68). After adjusting for potential confounders, treatment with statins was associated with a significant reduction in the risk of pneumonia (adjusted OR 0.49, 95% CI 0.35 to 0.69). The association was consistent among relevant subgroups (cardiovascular diseases, pulmonary diseases) and independent of the use of other prescription drugs.

Conclusions: The use of statins is associated with a considerable reduction in the risk of pneumonia in diabetic patients. In addition to lowering the risk of cardiovascular disease, statins may be useful in preventing respiratory infections.

Community acquired pneumonia ranks in the top 10 leading causes of death in the elderly and is a significant and increasing cause of primary care consultations and hospital admissions. Individuals with co-morbid conditions such as diabetes types 1 and 2 are at increased risk for lower respiratory tract infections and their complications. Furthermore, the impact of diabetes on deaths associated with pneumonia is substantial.

Recent in vitro studies have shown that inhibitors of hydroxy-methylglutaryl coenzyme A reductase (statins) have different immunomodulatory effects and that statins modulate both lipopolysaccharide induced pulmonary inflammation and pulmonary bacterial infection. Clinical prognostic studies have confirmed a potential immune regulatory effect and showed that previous treatment with statins was associated with decreased rates of severe sepsis and mortality in patients admitted to hospital with community acquired bacterial infections such as pneumonia. We therefore hypothesised that, if the use of statins can improve the outcome in pneumonia, statin treatment may prevent development of the infection itself. The aim of this study was to assess whether the use of statins is associated with a decreased risk of developing pneumonia in an ambulatory population of diabetic patients.

METHODS

Data source
Data were obtained from the United Kingdom General Practice Research Database (GPRD) which contains the computerised medical records of approximately 650 general practices. The GPRD is owned by the UK Department of Health and managed by the Medicines Control Agency.

Approximately 6.5% of the total population of England and Wales is represented in the database. The computer records contain patient demographic characteristics (height, weight), symptoms and diagnosis (using the Oxford Medical Information System (OXMIS) and Read codes which are mapped onto International Classification of Disease codes), referrals to specialist care, hospital admissions and their major outcomes, and all drug prescriptions in chronological order. The computerised recording of patient information was started by many general practitioners in the late 1980s and replaced the handwritten records used previously. Several independent validation studies have shown that the GPRD database has a high level of completeness and validity.

The study was approved by the Scientific and Ethical Advisory Group of the GPRD.

Study design and population
This retrospective case-control study was conducted in a population of 142 173 patients with diabetes (both types 1 and 2) recorded in the GPRD from 1 June 1987 to 21 January 2001 (original data extraction early 2002). This population has been used for previous studies on other topics not related to the present research study.

Cases were defined as patients aged 18 years and older with a first medical attendance for an episode of community acquired pneumonia (for selected OXMIS and Read codes see Appendix 1). The date of pneumonia diagnosis was recorded as the index date. For each case up to four controls were matched for sex, age (+2 years), general practice, and index date of the case. Controls were randomly selected from the baseline cohort of diabetic patients without a record of pneumonia. To be able to control for potential prognostic
differences between comparison groups, both cases and
controls were eligible for inclusion in the study if they had a
medical history in the database for at least 365 days before
the index date.

**Exposure to statins**
For each patient we identified all prescriptions for statins
before the index date (atorvastatin, cerivastatin, fluvastatin,
pravastatin, simvastatin). Episodes of statin treatment were
defined as a series of subsequent prescription refills for these
drugs. We assumed that a new episode of treatment started if
an interval of 14 days or more occurred between the
theoretical end date of a prescription and the date of the
next prescription for the same patient. The theoretical end
date was defined as the prescription date plus the duration of
use (number of tablets prescribed divided by the prescribed
daily dose). Patients were classified as current statin users
when the index date was between the start and the end date
of a treatment episode. Patients were classified as past users
when they were not a current user but had a history of use in
the year before the index date.

**Potential confounders**
To be able to control for potential confounding, medical
information was obtained on pneumonia risk factors that
could potentially confound the association between statin
treatment and outcome. For each patient we evaluated the
presence or absence of the following frequently occurring co-
morbidities as potential confounders: cardiovascular diseases
(congestive heart failure, stroke), pulmonary diseases, and
alcoholism.\(^{17–20}\) In addition, the latest data on smoking status
(non-smoking, ex-smoking, current smoking, or unknown)
and body mass index (\(<20, 20–24, 25–30, >30 \text{ kg/m}^2\), or
unknown) were assessed. Possible confounding drugs exam-
ined were influenza vaccination, pneumococcal vaccina-
tion, immunosuppressive drugs (methotrexate, cyclosporin,
tacrolimus, etanercept, infliximab, fludarabin, cladribine,
rituximab, or alemtuzimab), oral glucocorticoids, and use of
gastric acid suppressing drugs.\(^{21–24}\) A patient was considered
to have been exposed to a drug if more than one prescription
was issued in the year before the index date, except for
vaccination drugs which required only one prescription. The
prescription drugs shown above were selected because they
have been linked to a decreased or increased risk of
pneumonia, and those receiving these drugs may be more
likely to receive statins because of their likelihood of
attending a physician. We calculated the number of general
practitioner (GP) visits in the year before the index date as a
proxy for overall health status and healthcare consumption.

**Statistical analysis**
Univariate analysis by \(\chi^2\) tests and Student \(t\) tests was used to
test for statistically significant differences in baseline
characteristics between cases and controls. Conditional
logistic regression was used to estimate the strength of the
association between statin treatment and the risk of
pneumonia and expressed as odds ratios (OR) with 95%
confidence intervals (CI). We included all potential con-
founders and age in the multivariate analysis to adjust for the
baseline differences between both groups. Exposure to statins
was categorised as current, past, and never (reference). In
addition, to elucidate a possible time trend effect, the study
population was divided into quartiles based on ranked index
dates and analysed separately. Stratified analyses were
conducted to detect possible differences in effect between co-
morbidity related subgroups.

**RESULTS**
The study population comprised 4719 patients with a
diagnosis of pneumonia and 15 322 matched controls. A
diagnosis of pneumococcal pneumonia was recorded for 271
of the cases; 46 had a diagnosis of other bacterial pneumonia,
2050 had a diagnosis of bronchopneumonia with unspecified organism recorded, and 2291 had pneumonia with unspecified organism recorded. 28% of cases were referred to hospital because of their pneumonia diagnosis. About 48% of cases and controls were men; the mean age of both cases and controls was 73 years but the proportion of very old was higher among the cases than in the controls (table 1). Matching on age had a median difference in age of 1.00 year with a mean difference of –0.16 years. The median duration of observation in the GPRD was 4.0 years for cases and 4.1 years for controls.

The presence of cardiovascular diseases, pulmonary diseases, smoking, and alcoholism was higher in cases than in the controls (table 1). Univariate analysis showed that current statin treatment with a mean difference of –0.16 years. The median duration of observation in the GPRD was 4.0 years for cases and 4.1 years for controls.

The presence of cardiovascular diseases, pulmonary diseases, smoking, and alcoholism was higher in cases than in controls, as was the use of gastric acid suppressing drugs and oral glucocorticoids. Cases visited the GP more often than controls, as was the use of gastric acid suppressing drugs and oral glucocorticoids, and number of GP contacts. n = number of subjects in the subgroup analysis.

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The prevalence of current statin use (left axis) and the association with the occurrence of pneumonia in different co-morbidity subgroups. OR, odds ratio; CI, confidence interval.

Prior cardiovascular diseases 0.35 (0.21 to 0.57) 0.36 (0.22 to 0.62)
No prior cardiovascular diseases 0.63 (0.22 to 0.88) 0.64 (0.37 to 0.99)
Women 0.51 (0.33 to 0.78) 0.40 (0.25 to 0.62)
Men 0.65 (0.42 to 1.02) 0.56 (0.39 to 0.91)
No prior pulmonary diseases 0.50 (0.35 to 0.72) 0.41 (0.28 to 0.61)
Prior pulmonary diseases 0.87 (0.47 to 1.58) 0.83 (0.45 to 1.63)

Adjusted for age, cardiovascular diseases, pulmonary diseases, smoking, alcoholism, body mass index, gastric acid suppressing drug, flu vaccination, immunosuppressive drugs, pneumococcal vaccination, oral glucocorticoids, and number of GP contacts, with the exception of the grouping variable in the subgroup analysis.

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years of the study period compared with earlier years, despite a constant increase in the use of statins with time. The large confidence interval in the first quartiles is most likely explained by small numbers. Additionally, although the power to detect differences between individual statins is somewhat limited, all the statins had odds ratios in the same range below 1. This suggests that the effect of statins results from their intrinsic properties and is independent of trends in the prescribing of statins. Furthermore, adjustment of the associations for the presence of many important and frequently occurring co-morbidities and use of other prescription drugs did not substantially change the risk estimates. However, we cannot rule out the possibility of confounding by unknown or unmeasured factors.

This study was conducted in a high risk population of diabetic patients. Although patients with diabetes are more susceptible to infection, to our knowledge the mechanism of action of statins does not differ between diabetic and non-diabetic patients. The protective properties of statins may therefore be applicable to the general population, but further research is needed to establish a possible protective effect in non-diabetic patients.

Our study has some limitations. Firstly, identification of cases of pneumonia has the potential for misclassification due to incorrect coding. It is possible that, because of the broad definitions used for the diagnosis of community acquired pneumonia, GPs could have applied the diagnostic criteria differently—for example, some acute exacerbations of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease could be identified as pneumonia. We believe, however, that such misclassification is independent of statin use and would only lead to an underestimation of the true association between statins and the occurrence of pneumonia. In addition, the overall validity of the GPRD coding has previously been assessed several times and other validation studies on pneumonia coding in different medical databases have also shown positive predictive values ranging from 61% to 85%. Assuming that the diagnosis of patients admitted to a hospital is more accurate (better accessibility to chest radiography and sputum and blood cultures), it is reassuring that the diagnostic criteria for pneumonia is independent of statin use and would only lead to an underestimation of the true association between statins and and the occurrence of pneumonia. In addition, the overall validity of the GPRD coding has previously been assessed several times and other validation studies on pneumonia coding in different medical databases have also shown positive predictive values ranging from 61% to 85%. Assuming that the diagnosis of patients admitted to a hospital is more accurate (better accessibility to chest radiography and sputum and blood cultures), it is reassuring that the association between statin use and pneumonia in admitted hospital was identical to that in patients treated in primary care. In agreement with Laheij et al., our study also showed an association between the use of gastric acid suppressing drugs and pneumonia.

A second possible limitation is misclassification of exposure to statin treatment since we used prescription data. Patients using statins could have been non-compliant with their treatment and therefore could have used fewer statins than were prescribed. However, this would have led to an underestimation of the association between statin use and the occurrence of pneumonia.

Another concern is that people on statins take more comfort out of good health support—the so-called “healthy user effect”—which can induce confounding. It is possible that statins were preferentially prescribed to patients with higher socioeconomic status and a lower risk of pneumonia. We tried to reduce such confounding by matching subjects on general practice (thereby on geographical region and city area). However, the use of postcodes as a proxy for socioeconomic status has been debated in the literature. On the other hand, greater co-morbidity (and therefore a greater risk of pneumonia) could decrease the likelihood that an older person will receive effective treatment for asymptomatic conditions such as raised cholesterol levels. If this was the case, a substantial difference would have been seen between younger and older patients in the protective association between statins and pneumonia and this was not seen in our study.

Finally, we cannot rule out the possibility of confounding by unmeasured factors. However, the finding that the protective effect disappeared after discontinuing statin treatment strongly suggests that it is attributable to the properties of statins.

It must be emphasised that these findings on the preventive potential of statins should not be interpreted as suggesting that statins should be given to all diabetic patients to prevent pneumonia. Further confirmation is needed, particularly from large scale prospective randomised trials. In influenza pandemics statins could possibly provide additional support in the prevention of bacterial super-infections of the lung.

In conclusion, treatment with statins is associated with a considerably decreased risk of pneumonia in diabetic patients and their effects were consistent in all clinically relevant subgroups studied. Evidence is accumulating that treatment with statins may also influence bacterial respiratory infections, which may therefore broaden the indications for these drugs.

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None of the authors has in the past five years accepted the following: a payment for attendance at a symposium, a fee for speaking, a fee for organising education, funds for research, funds for a member of staff, fees for consulting. None of the authors has in the past five years been employed by an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the results of the study: reimbursement for attending a symposium, a fee for speaking, a fee for organising education, funds for research, funds for a member of staff, fees for consulting. None of the authors has in the past five years been employed by an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the results of the study: reimbursement for attending a symposium, a fee for speaking, a fee for organising education, funds for research, funds for a member of staff, fees for consulting. None of the authors has in the past five years been employed by an organisation that may in any way gain or lose financially from the results of the study: reimbursement for attending a symposium, a fee for speaking, a fee for organising education, funds for research, funds for a member of staff, fees for consulting.

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REFERENCES

LUNG ALERT

No further tests for PE required in low probability cases with a negative D-dimer test

In patients with suspected pulmonary embolism (PE), further diagnostic testing is often omitted on the basis of a negative D-dimer test result. This study is the first randomised controlled trial to evaluate this approach.

1126 randomised patients with suspected PE were evaluated and classified into low (group A) and high (group B) clinical probability groups; 456 with negative D-dimer test results were randomly allocated to control or experimental interventions. The experimental intervention for both groups was no further testing. The control intervention for group A was a ventilation-perfusion (VQ) scan followed by bilateral leg proximal vein ultrasonography. If the VQ scan was equivocal, ultrasonography was repeated at 7 and 14 days. The control intervention for group B was ultrasonography at 7 and 14 days. All patients in group B had a baseline VQ scan.

The patients were followed up for symptomatic venous thromboembolism (VTE) over a 6 month period. The prevalence of VTE in the 1126 patients enrolled in the study was 15.2%. In group A, six patients were lost to follow up and VTE occurred in 0 of 182 patients in the experimental group and 1 of 185 in the control group (95% CI –3 to 1.6 percentage points). In group B, VTE occurred in 1 of 41 patients in the experimental group and 0 of 41 in the control group.

The authors conclude that, in patients with a low probability of PE and a negative D-dimer test, additional diagnostic testing can be withheld without increasing the frequency of VTE during follow up. However, the study was limited by its use of VQ scanning and lack of double blinding. Computed tomographic pulmonary angiography (CTPA) is now a more widely used diagnostic test for PE.

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