



The Web Site of The Sacramento Bee

This story is taken from [Sacbee / Health, Fitness & Medical News](#).

## Inside Medicine: Is your doctor giving you this important number?

By Dr. Michael Wilkes -

Published 12:00 am PDT Saturday, May 5, 2007

I recently wrote a column about cholesterol-lowering medications. I stated that if 67 healthy men with elevated cholesterol took a cholesterol-lowering drug (from a class of drugs called statins) for five years, only one would benefit. The other 66 would not benefit, and it would cost about \$5,500 over the five-year period.

I received a ton of e-mail from readers. Most people commented on the usefulness of that number. They claimed that it was helpful in deciding whether to take the medicine. Many readers wrote that after knowing this number, they did not feel taking the drug was worth the effort or expense.

Others took the opposite view: If one person in 67 would benefit, they wanted to have a shot at being that one.

There is no right interpretation; both interpretations are valid, depending on the person's values.

This number -- the 1 in 67 -- is a term doctors call "the number needed to treat," or NNT. It is a relatively new concept -- it can be calculated for most treatments -- and it is grossly underused in sharing information with the public.

The NNT allows doctors and patients to understand the bang that they'll get for their investment -- in other words, what is the chance that a treatment such as a pill or surgery will result in the desired outcome.

This is not a small problem. In the United States, four out of five adults take a drug each week, and one-third of Americans take more than three drugs a week.

Doctors and pharmacists do a poor job talking with patients about their medications.

Many people will derive little or no benefit from their medicines, but they are never told this.

Others are not taking medicine because they believe their prescribed pills will offer no benefit when in fact they could derive substantial benefit.

The key is for doctors and patients to understand the NNT and to talk about it.

If I told you that one in every 665 people who took drug "X" for five years would not have a stroke or heart attack, would you take the pill? You might have some questions for me. What are the side effects? How much does the drug cost?

But eventually you'd make the best decision for you.

On the other hand, let's say you came to me with a bladder infection. When I offered you an antibiotic that when taken for three days would cure one out of two people (NNT is 2), you might not care as much about the cost of the medicine given the large expected benefit.

The only way you can make good decisions about what treatment is best for you is when you're

provided useful, understandable information about the drugs or surgery we are offering you.

Information you might find important includes:

- the NNT
- an explanation of exactly what we are hoping to accomplish by the treatment
- a ballpark estimate of the cost of treatment
- honest explanations of the risks or side effects

Just for comparison, here are some estimates of NNT:

- 1 in 2,550: The number of breast cancer deaths prevented in women between the ages of 50 and 59 screened annually for five years with mammograms.
- 1 in 2,000: The number of women ages 60-64 without risk factors who would prevent a hip fracture by taking medicine for osteoporosis for five years.
- 1 in 700: The number of people with mild high blood pressure who would prevent a stroke or heart attack by taking blood pressure medicine for one year.
- 1 in 16: The number of infections prevented by treating a victim of a dog bite with a week of antibiotics.
- 1 in 7: The number of children (otherwise healthy children) who benefit from treatment with an antibiotic for an ordinary ear infection.

Go to: [Sacbee](#) / [Back to story](#)

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use.  
The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852  
Phone: (916) 321-1000

Copyright © The Sacramento Bee