

Does an Aspirin a Day Really Keep the Doctor Away?

Aspirin, the 100-year-old painkiller that's in almost every medicine cabinet in America, has been hailed by many doctors as a "miracle drug" that prevents many deadly diseases, including heart attack, cancer and Alzheimer's.

Some medical professionals advise that almost everyone should take a baby aspirin (81 mg) daily. Other experts believe that daily aspirin shouldn't be a blanket recommendation.

But should you take aspirin? The answer may lie in your specific health situation.

First, let's take a look at aspirin's benefits:

- **Heart attack.** Harvard Medical School experts say aspirin helps prevent heart attacks in people with coronary artery disease and also in healthy men over the age of 50. According to the National Center for Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, aspirin lowers the risk of a first heart attack by 32 percent in men. Most experts believe aspirin does this by slightly thinning the blood, thus lowering the risk of clots.
- **Stroke.** The National Heart Foundation reported a study that found those who took aspirin reduced their risk of having a stroke by 25 percent.
- **Cancer.** A Harvard study found that women with early-stage breast cancer who took aspirin were half as likely to see their cancer spread and half as likely to die from the disease. A recent study from the American Cancer Society found that aspirin use reduced cancer deaths by up to 37 percent. Other studies have found that aspirin cuts the risk of prostate, colon, skin and lung cancer.

- **Dementia.** A study of more than 3,000 Utah citizens found that those who took aspirin, Advil or ibuprofen at least four times a week lowered their risk of developing dementia, including Alzheimer's, by 45 percent. Researchers believe that aspirin's brain benefits are due either to its ability to reduce inflammation or its keeping dementia-causing amyloid plaques from forming.

Not for Everyone

Despite this overwhelming evidence, popping a daily aspirin is not for everyone, experts say. Certain people should stay away from regular aspirin use.

These include those taking blood-thinning drugs, such as Coumadin and Plavix; those at risk for gastrointestinal (GI) bleeding; and those with age-related macular degeneration, a common cause of blindness in seniors.

AMD Sufferers, Beware

Aspirin may cause excessive blood thinning and dangerous bleeding in people taking prescription blood thinners to prevent clotting.

A study published last year in the journal *Ophthalmology* found that daily aspirin use more than doubles the risk of age-related macular degeneration (AMD).

"It isn't wise to recommend taking aspirin" for people with AMD, says William Christen of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston.

Biggest Danger

Stomach bleeding is most often cited as aspirin's biggest danger.

"The number one cause of GI bleeding is aspirin," David Brownstein, M.D., a leading holistic physician, tells Health

Radar.

Peter Hibberd, M.D., says aspirin may not directly cause GI bleeding, but it may exacerbate bleeding that is already occurring.

“Normally, a baby aspirin isn’t going to set you up for an ulcer and cause bleeding in the bowel,” he says. “But if you have a small lesion, the aspirin may make the bleeding noticeable.”

This can actually be a good thing if the bleeding isn’t too serious and it alerts you to an underlying, untreated health problem, says Dr. Hibberd.

He usually recommends a daily aspirin for patients who have a history of heart attacks.

“If a patient doesn’t have heart problems but has high blood pressure or a family history of heart problems, they should probably take aspirin from the age of 40,” he says.

“It’s not a universal recommendation—there are exceptions, such as if they are already taking a blood thinner. You should always seek the advice of your doctor.

“As a general rule, though, most people are going to benefit by taking a baby aspirin.”

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