

Can An Aspirin A Day Keep The Doctor Away?

(NAPSA)—Aspirin is a familiar over-the-counter medicine that reduces pain. Taking a low-dose or “baby” aspirin every day has long been recommended to people who have had a heart attack or stroke, so they can prevent another one. Evidence now shows that for people aged 50 to 69 at increased risk of cardiovascular disease, aspirin can help prevent a heart attack or stroke from happening in the first place and, if taken for five to 10 years, can also help prevent colorectal cancer.

This is great news because cardiovascular disease and cancer are major causes of death in the United States. Heart attacks and strokes are responsible for 30 percent of all deaths, and colorectal cancer is the third most common type of cancer—causing 8.3 percent of all cancer deaths.

But just because aspirin is available over the counter doesn't mean it is safe for everyone to take on a daily basis. Aspirin can cause serious side effects, such as bleeding in the stomach and intestines, and strokes caused by bleeding in the brain. So daily aspirin is only recommended for people who are at increased risk of cardiovascular disease and who are not at increased risk for bleeding. You should not begin to take aspirin daily without speaking with your primary care clinician first.

Who Should Take Aspirin for Primary Prevention?

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) found that how much a person can benefit from taking aspirin depends on his or her age and risk of cardiovascular disease. Daily use of low-dose aspirin is the most beneficial for people 50 to 59 years old who have at least a 10 percent chance of having a heart attack or stroke in the next 10 years. The Task



Daily aspirin can help some people prevent cardiovascular disease and colorectal cancer.

Force recommends that people in this group start taking aspirin after talking with their primary care clinician.

People 60 to 69 years old with increased cardiovascular disease risk can also benefit from taking aspirin, but because the risk of bleeding goes up with age, the overall benefit is smaller. Therefore, people in this group should make a decision with their primary care clinician about whether or not to take aspirin.

It is not clear whether taking aspirin is beneficial for people with increased risk of cardiovascular disease who are younger than 50 or older than 69. More research in this area is needed.

A number of factors go into determining a person's risk of cardiovascular disease, including age, sex, race, blood pressure level, total cholesterol level, and high-density lipoprotein (HDL) cholesterol level—also known as “good cholesterol.” Whether a person has diabetes, smokes, or takes blood pressure medication can also affect his or her risk of cardiovascular disease. Talk to your primary care clinician if you are between 50 and 69 years old to determine your risk for cardiovascular disease and for bleeding, and to determine if taking a daily aspirin is right for you.

Other Ways to Reduce Your Risk

Everyone can reduce his or her risk of cardiovascular disease and colorectal cancer by quitting smoking, eating a healthy diet and being physically active. Keeping blood pressure and cholesterol under control can also help prevent cardiovascular disease. Regular screening remains an important part of preventing colorectal cancer. The Task Force currently recommends colorectal cancer screening for people 50 to 75 years old, and for some individuals between 76 and 85 years old.

Does Aspirin Prevent Other Cancers, Too?

There is growing evidence that aspirin may also help to prevent cancers other than colorectal cancer, such as cancers of the esophagus and stomach. However, the evidence on aspirin to prevent these cancers is still new and not yet strong enough to be part of a recommendation.

No group currently recommends that people take aspirin for the prevention of cancer only, even for people who are at increased risk of cancer. In order for the potential benefits of taking aspirin to outweigh the potential risks, a person must have increased risk of cardiovascular disease.

Recommendations to Protect Your Health

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force is an independent group of national experts in primary care, prevention, and evidence-based medicine. The aim of the Task Force's work is to evaluate and identify critical preventive health services that a primary care clinician can perform.

For more information on the Task Force and to read the full report “Aspirin Use for the Primary Prevention of Cardiovascular Disease and Colorectal Cancer” and the recommendation about screening for colorectal cancer, visit www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org.