Health Tips: The Benefits and Risks of Daily Low-Dose Aspirin Therapy

Daily low-dose aspirin (81-325mg) is often recommended by doctors for people who are at risk of having a heart attack or stroke. Aspirin can help protect the heart, but it also has risks. Discussing the potential benefits and risks with one's doctor can help determine if aspirin is right for them.

What are the benefits of low-dose aspirin?

For people who have had a heart attack or stroke, aspirin lowers the risk of having another heart attack or stroke. Aspirin can also help lower this risk for people who have not yet had a heart attack or stroke but have significant risk factors for heart disease. Risk factors include diabetes, smoking, age, high blood pressure, high cholesterol and a family history of heart disease. Aspirin has the most benefit for people who have already had a heart attack or stroke.

Who is at risk for heart attack or stroke?

The risk of a heart attack or stroke can be evaluated by a doctor through questions about one’s lifestyle and medical history and doing a physical exam.

Some of the risk factors that increase the chance of having a heart attack or stroke are:

- Smoking
- High cholesterol
- High blood pressure
- Diabetes
- Family history of heart disease or stroke
- Age and gender
- Lack of exercise
- Drinking more than 2 alcoholic drinks a day for men, or one drink for women

What are the risks of taking daily aspirin?

The main concern is an increased risk of bleeding. Most of the time, the bleeding that can occur while taking aspirin is minor and does not cause problems. Nosebleeds or the time it takes for a cut to stop bleeding might increase. But sometimes, it can be serious, such as developing a stomach ulcer or bleeding in the brain.

Taking certain medications with aspirin can increase the risk of bleeding, and they should only be taken together if recommended by a doctor. These include Plavix, Coumadin (warfarin), Pradaxa, heparin, and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications such as ibuprofen and naproxen.

In general, aspirin is not recommended for people who:

- Are allergic to aspirin
- Have a history of gastro-intestinal bleeding
- Have uncontrolled high blood pressure
- Have asthma that is worsened by aspirin
- Have a bleeding or clotting disorder
- Have heart failure

Who should take daily aspirin?

Aspirin is recommended for most people who have had a heart attack or stroke, unless they are at high risk for having a bleeding complication with aspirin. It might also be suggested for those who haven’t had a heart attack or stroke but are at an increased risk of getting one, and have low risk of bleeding from aspirin.
When to contact a doctor

Suddenly stopping daily aspirin therapy can increase the risk of getting a heart attack or stroke and should not be done until speaking with a doctor.

It is important to contact a doctor right away if any signs of unusual bleeding occur such as:

- Black, tarry stools
- Blood in the urine or stool
- Frequent nosebleeds
- Unusual bruising
- Coughing up blood
- Heavy bleeding from cuts
- Vomit that looks like coffee grounds
- Heavy or unexpected vaginal bleeding