

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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July 28, 2019

“Aspirin May Be Contraindicated”

For years we were assured that daily aspirin therapy was a way to help prevent cancer and heart disease and protect overall health. But we are now being cautioned against taking daily aspirin without the recommendation of a doctor. So, what are the so-called current facts on this confusing matter? As of 2016, recommendations were for older Americans with a high risk of heart disease, to take low-dose aspirin every day to reduce their risk of a heart attack, prevent some cancers and cancer death, extend their lives and save the lives of hundreds of thousands of patients over the course of 20 years. Yet, by 2017 the FDA had concluded that the data do not support the use of aspirin as a preventive medication by people who have not had a heart attack, stroke or cardiovascular problems, a use that is called "primary prevention." Care is needed when using aspirin with other blood thinners, such as warfarin, dabigatran (Pradaxa), rivaroxaban (Xarelto) and apixiban (Eliquis). While doctors used to support daily consumption of low-dose aspirin to prevent heart attacks and stroke, three major clinical trials in early 2018 found the risks of the drug outweighed any benefits in people who did not already have heart disease. The trials led the American Heart Association and the American College of Cardiology to change clinical practice guidelines and to warn that any benefit from taking a daily low-dose aspirin would be more than offset by the danger of internal bleeding and other side effects in people considered to be at low or moderate risk for heart disease. But, one-quarter of adults 40 and older who don't have heart disease are taking aspirin regularly. Also, one half of adults over age 70 who don't have heart disease or stroke are taking aspirin regularly. Aspirin will raise the risk of bleeding and ulcer development regardless of age, but the older you get the more at risk you are anyway. The data came from the Sample Adult component of the 2017 National Health Interview Survey (NHIS). Among those aged 40 and older who did not have heart disease, 23.4% reported taking daily aspirin to protect their hearts. Extrapolated, that would work out to be approximately 29 million Americans. Of these, 22.8% (representing 6.6 million) were doing so without their doctor's recommendation. A meta-analysis of patients without symptoms of heart disease showed an association between daily aspirin use and intracranial hemorrhage.

In the America that I love, it appears that individuals with a bleeding tendency should avoid daily aspirin intake. It is also questionable if daily aspirin can be used for cancer prevention. We are at a point when so-called scientific studies add considerable confusion.

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