

# Aspirin Therapy: Preventing Heart Attacks and Strokes



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If you are at risk for developing heart disease—or even if you have already had a heart attack—taking an aspirin every day can help keep you healthy. People who take aspirin daily are much less likely of having a heart attack or dying from a heart attack or stroke.

## How does aspirin help with heart disease?

Most people think aspirin is just for aches and pains, but it is also a very helpful medicine for your heart and blood vessels.

Aspirin works by reducing the stickiness of the blood cells (called platelets) so they don't clump together, form a clot, or stick to the walls of the arteries, making them narrow. While aspirin itself is not enough to prevent heart disease and strokes, it is an important part of your medical treatment.

## What problems could I have taking aspirin?

The most common problem or side effect of taking aspirin is stomach irritation. This happens in very few people who use aspirin. Other problems experienced by regular aspirin users have included nausea, vomiting, indigestion, heartburn, severe hunger, abdominal pain, or stools that are bloody or black. (Black stools suggest bleeding.)

## To reduce the risk of having problems taking aspirin:

- Take “enteric-coated,” low dose, 81mg aspirin (which has a special coating that is less irritating to the stomach).
- Take aspirin with food.

Aspirin can cause more bleeding than usual after surgery or dental work (teeth cleaning does not cause this problem). Your doctor or other health care professional (such as a Care Manager) may want you to stop taking your aspirin about one week before you have surgery or dental work performed. Ask your doctor or dentist when it is safe for you to start back on your aspirin therapy.

## Can taking aspirin increase my chances of having a stroke?

Aspirin lowers your risk of stroke if you have heart disease or are at an increased risk for developing heart disease. Although most strokes are caused by a clot, some studies suggest that people who take aspirin regularly may be at slightly increased risk for having a certain type of stroke from a bleed (hemorrhagic).

## How much aspirin should I take?

The recommended amount is 81 to 325 milligrams (one low dose or adult-strength tablet) of plain or enteric-coated aspirin once a day with a meal. **Discuss taking aspirin with your health care professional.**

## How do medications (in general) fit into my treatment plan?

Although medications are an important part of your treatment plan, they do not take the place of healthy eating, regular physical activity, and stress management. If you are prescribed medications by your doctor, it's important for you to take them as directed. Don't stop taking them without consulting with your doctor first. If you are experiencing side effects, your doctor may be able to change the medication or the dosage to prevent side effects. It's likely that you may need to take this medication for the rest of your life, so work with your doctor to ensure that you are taking the right medicine and dose for you.

## What do I need to know about my medications?

Before you leave the clinic, take the time to ask your doctor or member of your health care team about your medications:

- Why am I taking them?
- How often and how long should I take them?
- Are there any special instructions

for taking this particular medication? Should I only take it at mealtime? Are there activities that I should avoid while taking this medication?

- What kind of side effects could I have and what symptoms should I look for? Is there a way to avoid any side effects?

## What should I do if I have side effects?

Be sure to tell your doctor if there are reasons why you cannot take any medication that's prescribed. Also, tell your doctor if you seem to have trouble remembering to take your medication.

## How can I remember to take my medications?

Everyone has struggled with remembering to do things that they don't regularly do. There are a number of things that can help you remember.

- Make a simple chart and post it in an obvious place where you will see it every day, like on the mirror in the bathroom.
- Set an alarm clock or watch for a reminder.
- Establish a daily routine for taking your medications, such as at bedtime, mealtime, or while at the beginning of a daily TV show.
- Use a pillbox that has seven sections, representing the days of the week.
- Record your medications on a wallet card or calendar.
- Can you think of others? \_\_\_\_\_

## Are there any special instructions I need to be aware of?

- Keep a personal medication record card (wallet card) with you and keep it up to date. Include any drug or food allergies that you may have and any non-prescription medications, herbs, or supplements that you are taking.
- Review your medication record card regularly with your doctor or other health care professional, including your dentist.
- When you purchase any new medications, including over-the-counter medications, ask the pharmacist to check for any potential drug interactions with your current medications.
- Refill your medications at least one to two week(s) before you run out.
- If a doctor or other health care professional recommends it, carry some kind of medical identification like a Medic Alert bracelet. For more information, call 1-888-633-4298, or go to **MedicAlert.org**.

## Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at **members.kp.org**.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Visit your facility's Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist.