

Aspirin Heart Warning

Taking aspirin to ward off heart disease could be harmful for people at low risk, say researchers. They analyzed the pooled results of four major international clinical trials covering 48,000 people, of which more than half were treated with aspirin.

Aspirin is well known to reduce the risk of heart attacks and stroke in those who have already suffered these problems.

The results showed that the painkiller cut the risk of first heart attacks by almost a third. But it also increased the risk of bleeding complications by almost 70%.

The researchers, led by Professor Larry Ramsay, of the Royal Hallamshire Hospital, Sheffield, concluded that it was important to identify how likely a person is to have a heart attack before deciding whether they should take aspirin.

If the risk of a heart attack is calculated as being moderately high - a 15% chance over 10 years - then they say that taking 75mg of aspirin once a day is a good idea. Except in people with ulcers or high blood pressure that is not being treated, the chance of preventing a heart attack far outweighs any possible harm.

And in people at moderate risk - between 5% and 15% - the benefits and disadvantages cancel each other out, so taking aspirin is probably worthwhile. However, they conclude that people whose chance of having a heart attack in the next 10 years is less than 5% should not take aspirin. For these people the side effects - such as bleeding from the stomach - are likely to outweigh any benefit.

The difficulty is that people do not often know their true level of heart disease risk - and may simply decide to treat themselves.

This risk can only be calculated using a set of specially devised tables, taking into account all the possible risk factors, such as smoking, family history, and cholesterol levels.

"Aspirin lowers the risk of having a heart attack, but is not recommended as a preventative measure for people who have a low risk of getting heart disease.

"Instead these people should concentrate on not smoking, doing regular physical activity - 30 minutes on five days a week - and eating a high fruit and vegetable, low fat diet."

The research is published in the journal *Heart*