



Question #27:

Re: End of the Road for Aspirin?

Q: I have read a recent report that although aspirin has been used for years to help protect patients from strokes, mounting evidence suggests the drug's benefits are too small compared with other treatments and although daily aspirin might still be beneficial for some patients, most – especially those with atrial fibrillation - should be offered something else as well or instead. Does this mean that stroke patients can expect to be put on a non-aspirin regimen in future?

Answered by:

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Answer:

A: When thinking about aspirin for stroke or heart attack prevention, it's always important to distinguish between those who have had a stroke in the past, and those who have never had any cardiovascular problem. For those who are basically "healthy", but who want to prevent a stroke or heart attack, this is called "primary prevention". For those who have already had a stroke or heart attack, Aspirin is used for "secondary prevention". The risk of having a stroke or heart attack if you have never had one is extremely low. The risk of having a stroke or heart attack if you have already had one is significantly elevated compared to those who have never had such an event. For primary prevention, the benefits of taking aspirin become somewhat more ambiguous, particularly since there is always a risk of gastrointestinal hemorrhage. It is this benefit of aspirin which has been recently questioned. It's not that Aspirin is useless; it's that the risk of having a stroke/heart attack is so low, that the risk/benefit ratio of Aspirin becomes questionable. Once a stroke or heart attack has occurred, the benefits of aspirin far outweigh the risks in general, and it is still highly recommended. Atrial fibrillation is a special situation in which new blood thinning medications currently exist. One of them, apixaban, has been found to be more effective and just as safe as aspirin. In this specific context of atrial fibrillation, therefore, there may be less of a role for aspirin and more of a role for other blood thinning medications. In general, however, after stroke, aspirin remains the most cost effective and useful medication around.