

daily dose

If you're taking ASA every day to prevent a heart attack, be warned that this drug could do more harm than good

BY DR. ART HISTER



I'm clearly very easy to please. Either that, or I don't have a life. Actually, it's probably both, but when my wife, my life's editor, informed me that I didn't have to write about H1N1 this time out, I did an immediate cartwheel. (Metaphorically only, of course, because I couldn't do cartwheels even when I was at an age when I could bend

over without creaking).

But what made me so happy about this assignment is that nearly everything I've written and discussed on TV and radio recently has been H1N1-related. Although to be fair, that's mostly because the public — and especially my media-savvy young editors — have demanded H1N1 24/7.

What's troubled me about

this is that in the interim, a lot of other important health news has been ignored. For example, in a recent study in the journal *Drugs and Therapeutics Bulletin*, British researchers concluded that for a person at average risk of suffering a heart attack or stroke, there is *no* net benefit in taking daily doses of ASA to try to prevent a heart attack or stroke. Please note: this doesn't apply to people who've had a previous heart attack. For these folks,

dose of ASA does indeed reduce the risk of heart attack and stroke in the average-risk person, but only by a pretty small amount on average.

But since ASA interferes with the blood's ability to clot, people who take it regularly also suffer from a significantly increased risk of bleeding, especially bleeding from gastro-intestinal ulcers. If you've never suffered one, this may not sound like a big deal, but believe me, this kind of bleed is very serious

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everyone agrees, there is a clear net benefit in taking ASA regularly.

The reason this news is so dreadfully important is that millions of people are taking daily doses of ASA, mainly because: 1) apparently **Dr. Oz** says it's a good thing to do, so hey, it must be right; and 2) ASA is available over-the-counter, so most people figure it must be safe in small doses — a major misconception about this very useful but still potentially dangerous drug.

Thus, in reviewing several previous huge studies on this issue, these researchers concluded that yes, taking a small daily

and can even be deadly. So according to this new study, the net effect for most people — fewer deadly heart attacks, but more deadly bleeds — does not lead to much life extension, if any at all.

Bottom line: if you take ASA every day just because, "Hey, what's the downside, dude?" you might want to take this report very seriously. There is indeed a significant potential downside to the regular use of ASA, and before you decide to take it for the rest of your life, talk to your doctor about that decision. Dude. ■

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