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Heart to Heart

With Philip S. Chua, M.D.

Aspirin: Anti-Stroke

Acetylsalicylic Acid (popularly known as aspirin) is a wonder drug and a most versatile one. It is not only good for headache, muscle aches, joint pains of arthritis, and fever, but it also reduces inflammation and, to some extent, heightens immunity. And, as if these were not enough therapeutic actions for a single drug, which has been in people's home since 1899, often underrated and practically taken for granted, aspirin, for the last two decades, have been "reintroduced" into the medical armamentarium, this time, with a more glamorous and celebrated role of being effective in the prevention of cancer of the colon, among others, and in the prophylaxis for, and treatment of, blood clot, heart attack and stroke. With these great "powers," aspirin, the great and universal pill, should cost an arm and a leg, but this 106-year-old pill costs less than a cent a tablet for a 325-mg dose. The added amazing scientific discovery is that all a person needs is as little as 81 mg (as in one baby aspirin, only a 3rd of the full strength) a day to prevent blood clot, heart attack, and stroke. In the United States, about 20 tons of aspirin is consumed annually. What a bargain for a simple, easily accessible, and an "all-around," multi-specialty, pill!

Are these medically proven facts?

Unlike "miracle exotic fruit juices" and other herbal preparations in the market today, whose manufacturers claim are effective against a host of medical conditions, from acne, allergies, arthritis, athletes foot to diabetes, high blood pressure, gastrointestinal illnesses, HIV infection, cancer, etc., but which substances have not gone through the official and proper scientific testing, neither proven safe or effective, and not approved by the U.S. Food and Drug, aspirin, for its therapeutic actions for the various conditions listed above, had undergone exhaustive laboratory animal testing and randomized, double-blind, clinical trials in humans, and officially approved by the U.S. FDA as an effective and safe drug, when used as directed under the supervision of a physician.

What are the new uses for aspirin?

The New England Journal of Medicine has released an official report on March 8, 2005 on a major study that "proved for the first time that aspirin can save

the lives of healthy women by preventing strokes, but not heart attacks.” The findings in this long term study involving 40,000 nurses are contrary to studies in men which showed that low-dose (81 mg) aspirin prevented heart attacks but not strokes, the exact opposite in women. The study also revealed that “anyone who takes an aspirin during a heart attack is more likely to survive and less likely to have a second attack later on.” Among women on daily aspirin therapy, there was a 17% lower risk of stroke, and “women 65 and older on aspirin were 30% less likely to have a stroke caused by blood clot.” Compared to men, somehow women are more prone to stroke.

Does acetaminophen have the same effects?

No, acetaminophen (paracetamol) does not have all the good effects listed above for aspirin. They are both good for headache, fever, muscle aches and pains, but only aspirin has those added actions enumerated in my introduction. The advantage of acetaminophen is that it is gentler on the stomach. Acetaminophen is also the drug recommended for fever or aches among young children. Aspirin is no longer prescribed for young kids because of the possibility of the deadly Reye’s Syndrome, a complication of aspirin therapy among them.

Is aspirin safe for everyone?

Just like any other drug, aspirin is not for everyone. This pill is a household item, common, “simple, and not intimidating,” but it could cause serious side effects in some people, like allergy, gastrointestinal bleeding, which could be serious and possibly fatal. This is why long-term aspirin therapy should be initiated only under a physician’s supervision.

QUOTATION:

**“Self-medication
is dangerous.
Ask your doctor
first if long-term
aspirin therapy
is for you.”**