

Heart Disease: Antiplatelet Treatment



After a heart attack or an angioplasty, you probably have concerns about your heart health. One of the things you can do to help your heart is to take medicine that helps prevent your blood from clotting. This is called antiplatelet therapy. Aspirin is the most common antiplatelet medicine. Your doctor may suggest that you take aspirin, another antiplatelet medicine, or both.

Why take antiplatelet medicine?

Antiplatelet medicine helps prevent heart attacks.

Heart attacks occur when blood flow to the heart is blocked. This usually happens because fatty deposits called plaque have built up inside the coronary arteries, which supply blood to the heart. If a plaque breaks open, the body tries to fix it by forming a clot around it. The clot can block the artery, preventing the flow of blood and oxygen to the heart and causing a heart attack.

Blood clots also can form on stents, which are small expandable tubes that are put in your coronary artery during angioplasty. They keep the artery open. Blood clots on a stent block blood flow and can cause a heart attack.

Antiplatelet medicine helps prevent blood clots in the arteries and on stents. This reduces the chances that you will have a heart attack.

Medicines to take

Your doctor may suggest that you take aspirin alone, another antiplatelet medicine, or aspirin and another antiplatelet medicine. You will probably have to take a low-dose aspirin every day for the rest of your life. How long you take another antiplatelet medicine usually depends on the type of stent you received during your angioplasty.

Is the medicine safe?

Aspirin and other antiplatelets have been used safely for years, but these medicines make bleeding more likely. Talk to your doctor about your risk for bleeding, especially if:

- You have stomach ulcers or have had bleeding in your stomach or another part of your digestive tract before.
- You had a stroke caused by bleeding in the brain.

Things to avoid when you take antiplatelet medicine

- Limit alcohol. Ask your doctor whether you can drink alcohol and how much you can drink. Drinking 3 or more alcoholic drinks a day while taking antiplatelet medicine increases your risk for liver damage and stomach bleeding.
- Do not take prescription or over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, herbal products, or supplements without talking to your doctor

first. Before you take any over-the-counter medicine, read the label. Many contain aspirin and could cause you to take too much aspirin.

- Do not take prescription blood thinners (anticoagulants) unless your doctor has told you to.

Other concerns

- Do not stop taking aspirin or another antiplatelet medicine without talking to your doctor first.
- You may need to stop taking aspirin or another antiplatelet medicine at least 5 days before surgery or any dental work that may cause bleeding. But do not stop taking antiplatelet medicine without talking to your doctor first.
- Talk to your doctor before taking aspirin or another antiplatelet medicine if you are pregnant, are breast-feeding, or plan to become pregnant.
- If you need to take a pain reliever, talk to your doctor about which one you should take.

When to call your doctor

Call 911 anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You passed out (lost consciousness).
- You vomit blood or what looks like coffee grounds.
- You pass maroon or very bloody stools.
- You have symptoms of a heart attack. These may include:
 - Chest pain or pressure, or a strange feeling in the chest.
 - Sweating.

- Shortness of breath.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Pain, pressure, or a strange feeling in the back, neck, jaw, or upper belly, or in one or both shoulders or arms.
- Lightheadedness or sudden weakness.
- A fast or irregular heartbeat.

After you call 911, the operator may tell you to chew 1 adult-strength or 2 to 4 low-dose aspirin. Wait for an ambulance. Do not try to drive yourself.

Call your doctor now or seek medical care right away if:

- You have:
 - Ringing in your ears.
 - Problems with your vision.
 - Nausea.
 - Dizziness.
 - Rapid, deep breathing.
- Your stools are black and tarlike or have streaks of blood.
- You have any unusual bleeding, such as:
 - Blood spots under the skin.
 - A nosebleed that you cannot stop.
 - Bleeding gums when you brush your teeth.
 - Blood in your urine.
 - Vaginal bleeding when you are not having your period, or heavy period bleeding.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- You have an upset stomach.
- You have questions about aspirin or other antiplatelet medicines.