



September 12, 2009 – Grand Rapids, MI

Aspirin and Heart Attacks

As you might imagine, I get asked a lot of questions about health information that gets passed around in e-mails. Many, such as the “John Hopkins Report on Cancer,” are urban legends. Occasionally they’re beneficial, although they’re often presented in a way that focuses on the scare rather than the benefit. Such is the case with an e-mail that’s being passed around called “Heart Attack Info.”

The E-mail

In the e-mail, you’re told to keep aspirin next to your bed; if you feel that you’re experiencing a heart attack, you’re told to chew a couple of aspirin, swallow with a bit of water, and then call 9-1-1. It goes on to tell you what else you should do: open the front door, phone a neighbor and say “Heart attack,” tell him or her you took aspirin, and then sit in a chair waiting for the emergency personnel to arrive. These are purported to be endorsed by the American Heart Association and the American College of Cardiology.

The e-mail talks about not lying down for some reason that isn’t really clear. Perhaps it’s the statistic they give saying 60% of the people who have heart attacks in their sleep don’t wake up. Perhaps because the symptoms for a heart attack vary; it’s not just chest pain, but pain in the jaw, the arms, and accompanied with nausea and vomiting; the problem is that these could also mean indigestion or a gall bladder attack. You’re then told to forward this e-mail to 10 people because a cardiologist believes that if you did, you would save one life.

The Facts

While it’s not presented very well, there’s more true than not in this e-mail. It stems from a Position Statement for Healthcare Professionals published in the journal *Circulation* in 1997 (1). The Position Statement was accepted by the American Heart Association as a procedure for physicians to follow for use of aspirin therapy in the hospital during a heart attack and for primary and secondary treatment. It was confirmed by one of the authors in a follow-up paper published in 2007 (2).

Note the wording: aspirin therapy is a procedure for *physicians* to follow for patients having a heart attack *in the hospital*—it was not aimed at us as patients. However, that didn’t stop it from being talked about in many different forums as the thing to do if you suspect you’re having a heart attack. Both the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute and the American Heart Association have addressed the issue on their websites (3,4). Here is what they both recommend:

If You Suspect You’re Having a Heart Attack:

Call 9-1-1—that’s the first thing you should do. Getting the emergency personnel on their way is the single most important thing you can do.

Second, if the emergency personnel tell you to take an aspirin, do it, but it should be done under their advice. If the person who’s on the phone with you doesn’t mention it, the emergency personnel will let you know if it’s right for you.

We have a natural inclination to want to do something—especially if we feel like we’re dying. But letting the emergency personnel guide you is very important because they’ll have to treat you later. If you take aspirin, that might affect the treatment they can administer once they get to you or you get to the hospital.

What if I'm Alone?

There are always those circumstances that can put us out of reach of healthcare personnel. There aren't that many in the age of cell phones, but it could happen. Based on what cardiologists recommended in several articles I read, I would take the aspirin. But if you're going to do it, do it the right way. Use a 325 mg aspirin, chew it, and then swallow it. If you only have the 81 mg size (baby aspirin or low-dose daily aspirin), take four at once and chew them before swallowing. Then find a way to get to a hospital—and no, you should never drive yourself. You must tell the medical personnel you took the aspirin, so find a way to write it down and pin it to your chest if you have to. Ladies, if you stick it in your bra, they'll find it because the first thing that happens when the paramedics get there is the shirt comes off.

I hesitated to include the previous paragraph because you might think that if you feel better, you're done. You're not done. But if healthcare professionals don't get to you, you might be done for good! However, there are those circumstances that happen and you should know what to do, not in place of emergency medical care, but until they get there.

The Bottom Line

I keep aspirin in my bathroom, in my shaving kit (yes, I shave even with a beard), in my briefcase, and in my car. I keep it everywhere. But just like the AHA and NHLBI recommend, I wouldn't take it unless told to by professionals. Why? Because just like Lewis Black says in one of his routines: "Those are the rules."

The important thing in all this? It all goes back to what I have on the back of my business card: "Never, never ignore chest pain." It could be the last thing you ever do. But keep the aspirin handy in case you need it. And if you want to forward this message to 10 people, go right ahead.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet



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