

Killing us softly with their guidelines

Two recent studies released by Harvard University not only found aspirin ineffective in preventing cardiovascular problems and stroke in those under 65, they suggested that regular pill popping may actually cause hypertension and other serious problems. So why the sudden push to get women to take up the habit?

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The news sounded grave. On February 19th, CBS News with Katie Couric announced that the American Heart Association had issued new guidelines for women. For the first time, it said, AHA was now urging all women to consider taking an aspirin every day to reduce their risk of heart disease or stroke.

"Research has shown that some low risk women actually have significant heart disease,"



The CBS News segment on Feb. 19th wasn't subtle in conveying the AHA message that women should consider taking an aspirin a day. But it warned that a physician should be consulted beforehand.

CBS health correspondent Jon La Pook warned. He added that women should not begin a daily aspirin regiment without first consulting their doctors first. The medication is tied to ulcers and dangerous internal bleeding. In the case of a certain type of stroke, it may even cause death.

La Pook interviewed Dr. Lori Mosca, director of preventive cardiology at the New York Presbyterian Hospital, who chaired the panel that wrote the guidelines.

"We do not want women to wait until they develop symptoms to begin to take action," Mosca told LaPook. Heart disease represents the leading killer among women, she noted, prompting the AHA to sponsor the panel.

A local spokeswoman for the association underscored the fact that women were being urged

to speak with their doctors, not simply start taking aspirin on their own.

The new guidelines also declare Vitamins C and E, beta carotene and folic acid supplements ineffective in preventing heart disease. Hormone replacement therapy also does not lower a women's risk.

During the CBS segment, health reporter La Pook spoke with one of Mosca's patients, Arlene Friedenber, who was at the hospital for a check-up.

"It's a wake-up call," said Friedenber. "I decided that I really must do something. I have adorable grandchildren who I just love to be with and I want to see them grow up."

The patient was shown taking

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an aspirin in a hospital bathroom.

However, an article that accompanied the televised report on the CBS News website said there was conflicting research about daily aspirin consumption.

According to Dr. JoAnn Manson, a Harvard University women's health expert, placing young women on the over-the-counter medication isn't justified by the evidence, and can lead to serious complications even in those who are older. Manson co-directed a clinical trial that examined the drug's risks and benefits. The CBS article stated, "In the 10-year study, aspirin prevented only one additional cardiovascular problem among roughly 35,000 women under 65 and led to 20 cases of bleeding requiring transfusion."

The CBS story shown on TV didn't mention the Harvard study. The segment overlooked another fact as well: the dramatic decline in the number of American women dying from heart disease in recent years. Whereas one in three women died from the malady in 2000, the ratio has decreased to one in four. In fact, life expectancy for women in the United States has climbed to its highest point in history - 80.4 years.

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) released the new statistics on February 1st.

The new findings are the result of a survey conducted by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute, which is part of the NIH. The decrease in deaths was attributed to greater awareness about risks, leading women to exercise

more, lose weight and avoid smoking or other activities which can trigger heart disease or stroke.

On its website for women called hearttruth.org, the NHLBI warns against daily aspirin use without a physician's recommendation, saying that the Food and Drug Administration has not approved the regiment. However, a spokeswoman confirmed that an NIH representative sat on the panel that wrote the new Heart Association guidelines.

Is History Repeating Itself?

In 2002, it was the NIH (under the Clinton Administration) that urged women to abandon daily, long-term hormone replacement therapy after it was linked to stroke, blood clots and cancer.

The bombshell announcement came when researchers working on the Women's Health Initiative halted a ten year clinical trial due to the high number of participants diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses.

Previously, most gynecologists encouraged women to start HRT as soon as they reached menopause. Estrogen replacement was touted as a wonder therapy for reducing heart disease, breast cancer and osteoporosis.

The claims turned out to be mostly erroneous. Wyeth-Ayerst, which manufactures the drug Premarin, posted annual revenues into the billions of dollars in the 1990's as a result of physicians promoting its product to patients. Whether or not the sudden abandonment of Premarin and other

HRT drugs in 2002 has contributed to the drop in cardiac deaths among women is unknown.

In late February, the results of another Harvard study were published, this one involving men. Researchers found that participants taking paracetamol, aspirin or nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen six or seven days a week were between a quarter to a third more likely to be diagnosed with high blood pressure. Ibuprofen is the painkiller used in the popular brands Advil and Motrin.

Those who took 15 pills a week, or about 2 pills a day, had a 48 percent risk of higher blood pressure than those who did not. High blood pressure has been linked to stroke, heart attacks and kidney failure.

Researchers at Harvard Medical School studied 16,000 male volunteers over a period of two years. They said the link to increased blood pressure may be caused by all three painkillers, which inhibit the effect of vasodilatory prostaglandins - chemicals that relax the blood vessels.

Interestingly, the televised CBS segment showed two separate scenes where Mosca and another doctor take their patients' blood pressure, both with glowing results.

Writing in the *Archives of Internal Medicine*, the journal of the American Medical Association, the authors of the new study claimed the data they gathered adds "further support to the hypothesis that non-narcotic analgesics independently elevate the risk of hypertension. Given their common consumption and the high prevalence of hypertension, our results may have substantial public health implications and suggest that these agents be used with greater caution."



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The findings were reported by *The Daily Telegraph*, a newspaper in Sydney, Australia.

Critics of both the American Heart Association and the television networks point to their significant financial ties to drug companies as the reason they may be slanting the scientific research to favor medication. Bayer, which makes the most popular brand of aspirin, is a corporate partner in the AHA "Go For Red" campaign, designed to raise awareness among women about heart disease.

(As part of the federal government, the NIH does not receive funding from pharmaceutical companies.)

Bayer also purchased a banner ad which appeared above the CBS

article online.

According to Merrill Goozner of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, Mosca's research is funded by the AHA via an educational grant from Kos Pharmaceuticals. This company submitted a supplemental new drug application last summer to the Food and Drug Administration for a product called Niaspan. Available since 1997, Niaspan is touted as the only FDA-approved, once-daily formulation of niacin that treats abnormal cholesterol levels.

A news release on the Health Care Sales and Marketing Network website states that "In patients with a history of myocardial infarction and hypercholesterolemia, niacin, the active ingredient in Niaspan, is indicated to reduce

the risk of recurrent non-fatal myocardial infarction or coronary artery disease and hypercholesterolemia."

But Kos has other uses for its heart drug. According to its website, when used in combination with aspirin, Niaspan has since been proven to reduce the duration and severity of flushing. It's in this capacity that Kos is now trying to patent the drug.

The CBS article does not mention the funding that the heart association received from Kos in financing Dr. Mosca's research. It did, however, refer to the issue of financing in general.

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So, what is heart disease?

Coronary heart disease is a disorder of the blood vessels connected to the heart. Like the brain, the heart requires a steady supply of oxygen and other nutrients from the bloodstream. A blocked artery is the most frequent cause of a heart attack and quick medical attention is essential to restoring blood flow to the organ.

The heart pumps 4300 gallons of blood through 100,000 miles of blood vessels. A blood pressure reading measures the force of the blood flow. The higher number measures the "systolic pressure", i.e. at the peak of each heartbeat when blood is pushed out of left ventricle. The "diastolic pressure" represents the second, which means the minimum rate of pressure between pushes.

Smoking, high cholesterol, diabetes, high blood pressure and genetics have been linked to heart disease and stroke.

When cholesterol rich plaque builds up in the coronary arteries,

the flow of blood may be blocked. The result is a condition called "atherosclerosis" - from Greek words gruel and harness. An artery becomes inflamed, the plaque becomes unstable and ruptures, and this can lead to the formation of a blood clot.

It's the clot that causes the myocardial infarction, better known as a heart attack.. When a clot forms in the neck or in the head, it cause a stroke.

"Angina" means the heart muscle is experiencing blood oxygen deprivation. Stable angina when this happens as you're exerting yourself. Unstable angina is worse because it happens at rest.

Aspirin is frequently prescribed for those who've had a heart attack or stroke because it thins the blood, making it less susceptible to clots. However, daily use can cause ulcers and uncontrollable bleeding. Thus, extended or daily use is controversial.

Tests to determine symptoms

of heart disease in women are not as reliable as in the case of men, because almost all of the original cardiovascular research studies were conducted on men.

Symptoms in women include the sudden onset of fatigue, shortness of breath, chronic indigestion and/or frequent headaches. A classic heart attack (which is more prevalent in men) involves crushing chest pressure below the breastbone with pain and tingling down the left arm, accompanied by profuse sweating, shortness of breath, and lightheadedness.

According to the NIH, screening tests such as the treadmill or exercise ECG are sometimes inadequate in detecting heart disease in women. Other tests available include an angiogram, nuclear scan and echocardiography. Another test known as intracoronary ultrasound uses a catheter to measure blood flow. It also provides information on the condition of the artery wall.

For more information, visit heart-truth.com.