

Rethinking the Baby Aspirin in the Time of COVID

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Baby aspirins taken daily have some value as a blood thinner, and as a result can reduce your chance of getting a stroke or a heart attack.

Currently, the government expert panel in charge of making recommendations for preventive care recommend it only for fifty-somethings who believe (or whose doctors believe) they have a decent chance of a stroke or heart attack in the next ten years. These medical experts haven't felt strongly either way about whether people in their 40s or 60s should take them. Not because there isn't a benefit, but because there is also a chance that any bleeding would become more substantial, due to the blood thinning. And people have a risk of bleeding, in accidents or sometimes internally. Hence the subdued recommendations.

That was then. This is now.

We here at Quizzify aren't doctors. So we generally don't make actual clinical recommendations. However, we aren't shy about recommending that people discuss certain topics with their doctor. Baby aspirin is now one of them, for four reasons, described in the next section.

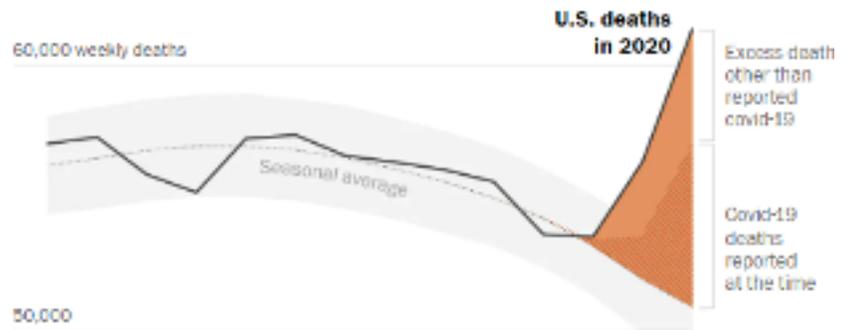
Reasons to reconsider a baby aspirin

First, a heart attack or a stroke could be worse now than in the past. That's because you may be less likely to race to the ER at the first signs of a heart attack or stroke, fearing that an ER could be a petri dish of COVID. Delay could mean the difference between going home in a few days or not going home at all.

Second, strokes are more prevalent and severe in people exposed to COVID. Younger, healthier people seem to have the greatest relative increase in risk -- though the absolute risk of stroke among younger people is still very low.

Third, the risk is greatest among people who have been exposed to COVID – which is a lot of us, here in Massachusetts.

Finally, the death rate for other-than-COVID is way up since mid-March, as the graph shows. No one knows why, but it's one more argument to take an extra precautionary measure at least temporarily – especially if, like most people at risk, you are missing a regular schedule of preventive visits or tests.



The downside of taking aspirin is bleeding –but opportunities to bleed are much fewer and farther between in this era of shelter-in-place. For most of us, the main chance of excessive bleeding is trauma. Fortunately, car accidents are way down, presumably along with work-related and sports accidents.

Taking any pill involves risks. In this case, even with a pill our parents used to give to us as babies, there is a low risk -- bleeding not caused by trauma. That's why you should touch base with your doctor before starting, and also along the way. The shorthand is to call your doctor if you see blood in your stool, and especially if you get unexplained headaches or strange neuro symptoms generally (like weakness) or if you noticeably bump your head. Presumably you would call anyway. Just remember to mention these aspirins.

So what should you do?

Send this column to your doctor, along with this summary of the original government recommendation. You and your doctor may decide that the harms-benefits analysis has shifted, at least for now, quite a bit in favor of daily baby aspirins.

We here at Quizzify will be following our own advice as well, even though we hate taking pills. We used to even have trouble swallowing them – until someone suggested coating them in olive oil, a hack that works so well we've made a quiz question out of it.

