

Tuesday, 23 August 2005, 23:46 GMT 00:46 UK

Aspirin 'cuts bowel cancer risk'



Taking aspirin regularly for over 10 years does reduce the risk of bowel cancer, a study which looked at almost 83,000 women has suggested.

Those who had taken two or more aspirin - or similar painkillers - a week had significantly cut their risk, it found.

However, the doses were high enough to increase the risk of gut bleeds.

The Harvard Medical School team told the Journal of the American Medical Association more work was needed to see if the benefits outweighed the risks.

"Our study supports a possible role for aspirin in cancer prevention"

Dr Andrew Chan

Regular aspirin use was already known to cut the risk of recurrent benign bowel tumours, called colorectal adenomas, in patients with a history of bowel tumours, either cancerous or benign.

The Harvard team focused on 82,911 women of which 962 developed bowel cancer over a 20-year period.

Among women who regularly used aspirin - or other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) - there was a 23% reduced relative risk of bowel cancer compared with those who did not take the drugs regularly.

However, significant risk reduction was not observed until more than 10 years of use.

Notably, women who took more than 14 aspirin per week for longer than 10 years had a 53% lower relative risk.

Dose effect

No matter how long they had been taking aspirin for, the benefit appeared to be related to dose - the biggest benefit at higher doses.

Compared with women who reported no use, the relative risk for cancer was 11% lower with two to five aspirin per week; 22% lower with six to 14 aspirin per week; and 32% lower with more than 14 aspirin per week.

A similar dose-response relationship was found for non-aspirin NSAIDs. The researchers, led by Dr Andrew Chan, said: "Our study supports a possible role for aspirin in cancer prevention.

"However, any substantial impact of aspirin on cancer necessitates early initiation and prolonged, consistent use.

"Moreover, optimal chemoprevention may require substantially higher doses of aspirin than currently recommended for the prevention of cardiovascular disease."

The researchers stressed that taking aspirin in higher doses was associated with side effects, such as gastrointestinal bleeding.

They said more work was needed to determine whether the benefits of taking the drug

outweighed the risk.

Ed Yong, of Cancer Research UK, agreed. He said: "High doses of aspirin are needed to reduce bowel cancer risk, and these could cause bleeding in the digestive system.

"Future studies need to weigh up all of the risks and benefits of high doses of aspirin before recommendations can be made.

"Besides taking aspirin, there are many other ways of reducing the risk of bowel cancer such as keeping a healthy bodyweight, being active and eating lots of fibre and fish and less red or processed meat."

Sunday, 28 March, 2004, 23:05 GMT 00:05 UK

Aspirin 'fights ovarian cancer'

Aspirin and other similar painkillers may be able to fight ovarian cancer, a study suggests.

Aspirin belongs to a group of medicines called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs or NSAIDs, which can block a chemical called Cox-2.

Researchers in the United States have found that this protein also helps ovarian cancer tumours to grow.

Speaking at an American Association for Cancer Research conference, they said the drugs could fight the disease.

More evidence

The research is the latest in a string of studies to suggest aspirin, which has been around for over 100 years, could have a role in treating cancer.

Previous studies have suggested it may protect against a range of cancers, including breast, colon and bowel.

"The research isn't conclusive yet"

Dr Elaine Vickers,
Cancer Research UK

A growing number of scientists are involved in trials to see if these theories are correct.

This latest study, by Mike Xu and colleagues at Fox Chase Cancer Center, suggesting it could fight ovarian cancer is particularly welcome.

Almost 7,000 women in the UK are diagnosed with ovarian cancer each year. In many cases, the disease is not spotted until it is very late.

"It is often very hard to diagnose and the treatment options are relatively rare," said Dr Elaine Vickers of Cancer Research UK.

"Many women are responsive to chemotherapy but they can become resistant. It would be fantastic if we could reduce the risk of this disease."

Doctors at Fox Chase Cancer Center are taking part in a US government-funded trial to examine how well Aspirin and other NSAIDs can protect against cancer. Similar trials are also underway in the UK.

"There have been a lot of studies to date and a lot ongoing which suggest that aspirin could potentially reduce the risks of some forms of cancer," Dr Vickers said.

"But the research isn't conclusive yet and we certainly cannot advise people to start taking aspirin regularly."

A study published earlier this year suggested that regular long-term use of aspirin could increase the risks of pancreatic cancer.

Wednesday, 26 May, 2004, 09:09 GMT 10:09 UK

Aspirin cuts breast cancer risk

A new piece of US research backs the idea that aspirin protects against certain types of breast cancer.

It found women who used aspirin or similar painkillers at least once per week for six months reduced their risk of breast cancer by 20%.

However, the University of Columbia researchers say it is too soon to advise women to start taking aspirin against breast cancer, however.

Their findings appear in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

Previous studies have suggested aspirin may protect against a range of cancers, including breast, colon and bowel.

Dr Mary Beth Terry and colleagues looked at almost 1,500 women with breast cancer and a similar number of healthy women acting as controls.

They then examined what effect the frequency and duration of use of aspirin or other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) had on the women's risk of breast cancer.

Reduced risk

The researchers found a dose effect. Women who had taken aspirin at least once per week for six months or longer were 20% less likely to develop certain breast tumours.

But those who used seven or more tablets a week reduced their risk by 28%.

" These data add to the growing evidence that supports the regular use of aspirin and other NSAIDs as effective chemopreventive agents for breast cancer "

Dr Mary Beth Terry and colleagues at the University of Columbia

Women who had gone through the menopause showed the greatest benefits.

The reduced risk was only seen among those with a type of breast cancer that is thought to be linked to oestrogen, however.

This is the most common type of breast tumour. Wednesday, 26 May, 2004, 09:09 GMT 10:09 UK

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This is the most common type of breast tumour.

Almost two-thirds of tumours from pre-menopausal women and three-quarters of tumours from post-menopausal women contain detectable oestrogen receptors, which means their growth is stimulated by the presence of oestrogen, according to Cancer Research UK.

The results for NSAIDs such as ibuprofen was slightly weaker.

Use of a painkiller which works in a different way to aspirin and NSAIDs did not appear to reduce the risk of breast cancer.

Dr Terry and colleagues said: "These data add to the growing evidence that supports the regular use of aspirin and other NSAIDs as effective chemopreventive agents for breast cancer."

Balancing risks and benefits

Aspirin and NSAIDs are associated with gastric side effects, in particular bleeding, among regular users.

Dr Terry's team said it was important to have more research to look at what dose of aspirin might be protective.

"The potential benefits need to be balanced against potential harmful effects of long-term aspirin use such as peptic ulcer disease and gastrointestinal bleeding," they said.

"It is also important to study whether these findings are supported in more racially and ethnically diverse populations," they added.

Pamela Goldberg, chief executive of Breast Cancer Campaign said: "This is a very interesting

study and opens up a whole range of further research, not only in the possible use of aspirin to reduce risk but also in conjunction with existing drugs to improve treatments."

But she added: "Aspirin is not without side effects and we don't know what the negative consequences of long-term use might be nor the dose.

"Many people are already taking low dose aspirin to reduce the risk of heart disease and it would be really interesting if this drug which we take so much for granted could also reduce the risk of breast cancer."

Tuesday, 8 April, 2003, 23:09 GMT 00:09 UK

Painkillers 'prevent cancer'

Taking over-the-counter painkillers such as aspirin or ibuprofen could reduce the risks of breast cancer by a fifth or more, says a study.

However, doctors have urged women not to start taking painkillers regularly for this reason without taking medical advice first - as long-term painkiller use holds health risks of its own.

The study, which involved more than 80,000 post-menopausal US women, is published in the Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research.

The findings applied to non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs - aspirin and ibuprofen are the best known examples of these, but paracetamol and codeine belong to other classes of painkiller.

"Doctors would advise people not to take aspirin or ibuprofen regularly without good reason"

Professor Chris Parakeva, University of Bristol

Women who took two or more tablets a week were considered "regular users".

Regular use of aspirin for between five and nine years was linked to a reduction in risk of breast cancer of 21% over an average of three and a half years.

Those who had been taking the drug even longer had an even bigger reduction - 28%.

Ibuprofen users did even better, recording a 49% reduction in risk.

The results are suggestive that longer-term ibuprofen or aspirin use could produce longer-term benefits against breast cancer.

However, regular use of "low-dose" aspirin had no apparent protective effects.

"These results suggest that even women at high risk for breast cancer may be protected by taking NSAIDs," said Dr Randall Harris, who led the study.

Aspirin is already recommended by many doctors to patients who are at a high risk of heart disease.

Studies also suggest strongly that it could prevent or slow down bowel cancer if taken in slightly higher doses.

Smaller studies had already pointed to a protective effect against breast cancer.

'No surprise'

Professor Chris Parakeva, a researcher from Bristol University who has looked at the effects of NSAIDs on cancer, said that the US findings were "not surprising".

He told BBC News Online: "The evidence in bowel cancer is quite strong, and people are already looking to see whether it has an effect in other cancers.

"However, the doses involved in bowel cancer protection are higher than those recommended for heart disease prevention.

"Doctors would advise people not to take aspirin or ibuprofen regularly without good reason."

Both types of NSAID are associated with gastric side effects, in particular bleeding, among regular users.

A spokesman for Breakthrough Breast Cancer backed this view.

She said: "This is a very interesting study.

"It has been known for some time that aspirin is beneficial in preventing heart disease and recently more evidence to suggest it may also help reduce risk of other cancers including lung, prostate and colon.

"Clearly this study is exciting however we would express caution before recommending that women take aspirin on daily basis until studies have established long-term side effects. Any woman with concerns should consult their GP."