

Acute Coronary Syndrome: Medicines

Acute coronary syndrome (ACS) is the term used to describe certain conditions that cause a reduction of blood flow to the heart. These conditions include: unstable angina and myocardial infarction (heart attack).

If you have ACS, your doctor has probably prescribed medicines that you will need to take for a long time. These medicines help improve blood flow to your heart, prevent blood clotting, and reduce your risk of having more heart problems in the future.

Below you will find an overview of medicines usually prescribed to treat ACS and information about their benefits, risks and side effects. If you have questions or concerns about the medicines you are taking, be sure to ask your doctor for more information.

ACE Inhibitors

ACE inhibitors are a group of drugs that can help if your heart is not pumping blood well. This type of medicine improves blood flow by helping to open (dilate) your arteries and lower your blood pressure.

If you have ACS, your doctor may want you to take an ACE inhibitor alone or in combination with other medicines, such as a diuretic or a beta blocker.

Side effects. ACE inhibitors don't usually cause troublesome side effects. The most common side effect is a dry cough. More rare side effects include dizziness, reduced appetite, fatigue (feeling out of energy), problems with the kidneys and an increase in the level of potassium in the blood.

Risks. Because ACE inhibitors can cause birth defects, pregnant women should not take this type of medicine.

In rare cases, ACE inhibitors can lead to a serious allergic reaction (called an anaphylactic reaction) that causes swelling in certain areas of the body. This reaction is more common in black people and people who smoke. It can be life-threatening. You should get immediate medical attention if you experience swelling after taking an ACE inhibitor.

Aspirin

Your doctor may want you to take a low dose of aspirin each day. Aspirin helps keep your blood from forming clots. Blood clots can clog the arteries that carry blood and oxygen to the heart (called the coronary arteries). Blockages in the coronary arteries increase your risk of having a heart attack or stroke.

Side effects. Common side effects of aspirin include nausea and upset stomach. Some people feel nervous or have difficulty falling asleep when taking aspirin. Call your doctor if your symptoms are severe.

Risks. Aspirin can increase your risk of stomach ulcers and gastrointestinal bleeding (bleeding in your stomach and intestines). Doctors usually prescribe a low dose of aspirin (between 81 mg per day and 162 mg per day) for people who have ACS. The low dose provides the same benefits as a higher dose, with less risk of internal bleeding. Talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of aspirin therapy. He or she will prescribe the aspirin dose that is right for you and tell you exactly how to take it.

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Beta Blockers

Beta blockers are a group of drugs that lower the heart rate and blood pressure. They also help improve blood flow to the heart, reduce chest pain and prevent more damage to the heart.

If you have had a heart attack, your doctor may prescribe a beta blocker. He or she may want you to take a beta blocker alone or in combination with other medicines, such as a diuretic or an ACE inhibitor.

Side effects. The side effects of beta blockers tend to be mild. Common side effects include cold hands, fatigue, dizziness and weakness. Less common side effects include shortness of breath, difficulty sleeping, depression and decreased sex drive.

Risks. Beta blockers are not recommended for people who have asthma. This type of medicine can trigger severe asthma attacks.

Beta blockers may make it difficult to recognize signs of low blood sugar (such as rapid heartbeat) in people who have diabetes. If you have diabetes, your doctor will probably tell you to check your blood sugar often.

Stopping beta blockers abruptly increases the risk of heart problems. If you need to stop taking a beta blocker, it's important to stop gradually, according to your doctor's instructions.

Antiplatelet drugs

Antiplatelet drugs are sometimes prescribed along with aspirin therapy. This type of medicine helps prevent blood clots by not allowing certain cells in the blood (called platelets) to clump together. This reduces the risk of blockages in the coronary arteries that can lead to heart attack and stroke.

Side effects. Some common side effects of antiplatelet drugs include nausea, upset stomach, stomach pain, diarrhea, itching and a rash. Talk to your doctor if you experience side effects while taking this medicine.

Risks. Because antiplatelet drugs prevent blood clotting, they can increase the risk of serious bleeding in some people.

Diuretics

Diuretics (also called water pills) help the body get rid of extra sodium (salt) and fluid. This type of medicine lowers your blood pressure by reducing the amount of fluid flowing through your blood vessels.

Diuretics are very commonly prescribed to treat high blood pressure. They are sometimes used in combination with beta blockers and ACE inhibitors.

Side effects. Common side effects of diuretics include increased urination, increased thirst, fatigue, muscle cramps and low blood pressure. Less common side effects include increased blood sugar, increased cholesterol, irregular menstrual periods in women and impotence in men.

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Risks. People who take diuretics can have too much or too little potassium in their blood, depending on the type of diuretic they take.

Statins

If you have had a heart attack, your doctor may prescribe a statin. Statins are a group of drugs used to lower “bad” cholesterol (also called LDL, or low-density lipoprotein) levels. Statins may also help increase “good” cholesterol (also called HDL, or high-density lipoprotein) levels.

Most people who take statins will take this type of medicine for the rest of their lives.

Side effects. Muscle pain is the most common side effect of statins. The pain can be mild or severe. Less common side effects include nausea, diarrhea, gas and constipation. People who take statins may also get a rash. This side effect is more common when a statin is taken in combination with another drug used to lower cholesterol levels (called niacin).

You are at higher risk of having side effects from statins if you:

- Are a woman.
- Are age 65 or older.
- Have liver or kidney disease.
- Have type 1 or type 2 diabetes.
- Take several types of medicine.

Some people may feel discouraged by the side effects caused by statins. However, the side effects are not usually life-threatening. Your doctor can help you find ways to manage them. If you are worried about side effects, talk to your doctor about the risks and benefits of taking statins.

Risks. In some people, statins can cause liver damage. Your doctor will probably want to have your liver function tested on a regular basis.

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