Aspirin is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) that is used to decrease pain and reduce swelling. More recently, low dose aspirin has been used to treat and prevent cardiovascular disease (CVD), which includes conditions such as heart attack, stroke, and peripheral artery disease in the legs.

Aspirin helps prevent CVD by affecting the blood’s clotting abilities. When you bleed, clotting cells in the blood called platelets travel to the wound and form a plug that seals the opening in your blood vessels to stop the bleeding. This is an appropriate action of platelets. Unfortunately, this clotting can also occur in the blood vessels that supply blood to your heart and brain. Platelet clumping that occurs in these blood vessels can prevent the flow of blood and lead to a heart attack or stroke. Aspirin reduces the clumping action of platelets and therefore helps prevent against CVD.

In 2009 the U.S. Preventative Services Task Force (USPSTF) updated their recommendations about aspirin use for prevention of CVD in people who do not have one of the conditions listed above. They recommend aspirin for men aged 45-79 to reduce the risk of a heart attack and women aged 55-79 to reduce the risk of ischemic stroke when the benefits outweigh the risks of bleeding. The potential benefit of aspirin in an individual depends on his or her baseline risk of having a heart attack or stroke in the future.

Before taking aspirin daily it is important to talk to your doctor. Aspirin does have several side effects; the major ones include stomach upset (nausea, vomiting, heartburn, stomach pain, or ulcers) and bleeding (bleeding in the stomach or brain). Aspirin can interact with other medications and herbal supplements to increase your risk of bleeding and can also have an effect on other health conditions.

If your primary care provider does recommend aspirin they will most likely recommend taking one baby aspirin (81 mg) every day or one regular aspirin (325 mg) every other day. When purchasing an aspirin, choose one that is enteric-coated because this form is gentler on the stomach.

If you are not a candidate for daily aspirin therapy there are other strategies proven to reduce cardiovascular events, such as reducing cholesterol levels and blood pressure, smoking cessation, and weight control through diet and exercise.