

VITAL SIGNS  
JOHN O'NEIL

SIDE EFFECTS

## When Aspirin Can't Help a Heart

High cholesterol levels may undermine aspirin's protective effects against heart attacks, according to a study from the University of Maryland Medical Center.

Aspirin works against heart attacks by making it harder for platelets in the blood to stick together, reducing the chance for a clot to form in a blood vessel and block the circulation.

But aspirin is ineffective in limiting clotting in a significant minority of patients, according to Dr. Michael Miller, the lead author of the study, published in the journal of the British Medical Association, *BMJ*.

To explore one possible explanation, the researchers tested the blood levels of cholesterol and platelet stickiness in 56 heart patients who were chosen at random.

All of them were taking aspirin as a preventive measure against heart attacks.

In 14 patients, the platelets clumped together at an unhealthy rate.

Nine of the 14 had high cholesterol levels, Dr. Miller said.

"We've taken aspirin's effects



Stuart Goldenberg

for granted," he said. "But there may be cause for concern for individuals with high cholesterol levels who are being assured that all they need to do is take aspirin to be protected."

The study suggested that for patients with high cholesterol levels physicians should consider higher doses of aspirin or using other anti-clotting medications.

Dr. Miller said patients should first work to lower their cholesterol "either through diet changes, increased exercise or more potent cholesterol-lowering medications."