Antiplatelet drugs might help, not harm, survivors of brain haemorrhage

RESTART Collaboration

Video Abstract

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Abstract

More than one-third of people who've survived brain hemorrhage stop taking oral anti-blood-clotting drugs, like aspirin. Normally taken to prevent blood vessel blockage, so-called antiplatelet drugs increase the risk of bleeding in general. So they're widely believed to increase the risk of brain hemorrhage happening again. But new research suggests that might not be the case. Researchers came to that conclusion following a randomized trial involving more than 500 survivors of brain hemorrhage in the UK. Participants were mostly men over the age of 70; all had a history of diseases that cause blockage of blood flow due to clotting but had stopped taking oral antiplatelet drugs after their brain hemorrhage. Researchers split those patients into two groups: half were encouraged to start antiplatelet drugs, and half were encouraged to stay off these drugs. Over the course of 5 years, the researchers kept track of cases of recurrent bleeding and of any major event involving the blockage of blood flow, including stroke and heart attack. Overall, fewer patients who started antiplatelet drugs experienced recurrences of brain hemorrhage than did those who continued to avoid these drugs. The numbers of participants experiencing major blood vessel blockage were similar between the two groups. Those findings appear to exclude all but a very modest increase in the risk of recurrent brain hemorrhage with antiplatelet drugs—a risk that could be too small to exceed the established benefits of these drugs for secondary prevention. But that isn't the final word on the matter. The results strongly indicated that antiplatelet drugs might reduce the risk of brain hemorrhage happening again—the opposite of what was expected. However, the research team could not exclude the effect of chance on this finding. To be sure, further trials on larger and more varied samples of people are needed—some of which are currently ongoing. What does appear to be clear, at least, is that the widely held view that antiplatelet drugs are bad for survivors of brain hemorrhage isn't necessarily the case. Current and future research could soon narrow in on an even more definitive answer for the two million people worldwide who suffer stroke due to brain hemorrhage each year.