

Heart Medications and What They Do

Many types of medications are prescribed to treat heart disease. In addition to following directions for taking medications as prescribed, it's important for women who live with heart disease to:

- ♥ know what their prescribed medications are supposed to do
- ♥ recognize possible side effects

A description of all the drugs used to treat heart disease would be too extensive for this module. The list in this fact sheet includes the most commonly prescribed medications for heart disease.¹ Similarly, this fact sheet describes only the most common side effects. *All* medicines have side effects. Keep in mind that the side effects for one person may be different for another person. It is important to report side effects as soon as you begin to experience them, some can be serious and others may be bothersome, but manageable. Ask your health care provider what to expect and what to do if you experience any problems.

Angiotensin-converting-enzyme (ACE) Inhibitors

ACE inhibitors relax and dilate (widen) arteries to lower blood pressure and make it easier for the heart to pump blood. ACE inhibitors also block some of the harmful actions of the endocrine system that may occur with heart failure.

One of the most typical side effects of ACE inhibitors is dry cough.² If coughing keeps you up at night or interferes with your daily activities, contact your health care provider.

Other possible side effects include:

- ♥ increased blood-potassium level (hyperkalemia)
- ♥ fatigue
- ♥ dizziness
- ♥ headaches
- ♥ fainting

ACE inhibitors are not recommended in pregnancy. If you become pregnant notify your health-care provider immediately.

Angiotensin II Receptor Blocker (ARBs)

ARBs are used to decrease blood pressure in people with heart failure. They are often prescribed for people who cannot tolerate an ACE inhibitor. ARBs decrease certain chemicals that narrow the blood vessels. Decreasing these chemicals allows blood to flow more easily through the body. These drugs also decrease certain chemicals that cause salt and fluid buildup in the body.

Few people experience side effects with ARBs, but possible side effects may include:³

- ♥ headache
- ♥ dizziness
- ♥ lightheadedness
- ♥ nasal congestion
- ♥ back and leg pain
- ♥ diarrhea

However, ARBs can cause birth defects, so women should not take them if they are pregnant or plan to become pregnant. Similar to ACE inhibitors.

Vasodilators

Vasodilators are used to treat heart failure and control high blood pressure by relaxing the blood vessels so blood can flow more easily through the body. Vasodilators are prescribed for patients who cannot take ACE inhibitors.

Vasodilators have a number of side effects, some of which require taking other medications to counter those effects.

Side effects may include:⁴

- ♥ chest pain (angina)
- ♥ rapid heartbeat (tachycardia)

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- ♥ heart palpitations
- ♥ fluid retention (edema)
- ♥ nausea
- ♥ vomiting
- ♥ dizziness
- ♥ flushing
- ♥ headache
- ♥ nasal congestion

In addition, some vasodilators can increase the risk of developing lupus, a connective tissue disease.

Anticoagulants

Anticoagulant drugs help prevent harmful clots from forming in the blood vessels. These drugs may prevent clots from becoming larger and causing more serious problems. Anticoagulants are often prescribed to prevent first or recurrent stroke, they tend to carry the risk of serious side effects, including:⁵

- ♥ bruising
- ♥ skin rash
- ♥ bleeding in the brain, stomach, and intestines

In addition, anticoagulants tend to be affected more by other drugs, and warfarin a commonly prescribed anticoagulant, may be affected by vitamins, and even certain foods.

Antiplatelet Agents

Antiplatelet agents, such as aspirin, help to prevent clotting. They are most commonly prescribed to those who have had a heart attack, unstable angina, ischemic strokes, TIA (transient ischemic attacks, or “little strokes”), and other forms of cardiovascular disease. These drugs are usually prescribed preventively, when plaque buildup is evident, but the artery is still free of any large obstructions.

Antiplatelet therapy is associated with a risk of hemorrhage, especially in the gastrointestinal tract.⁶

Beta-Blockers

Beta-blockers block the effects of adrenaline (epinephrine). These drugs also decrease the production of harmful substances produced by the body in response to heart failure. Sometimes they are used to treat abnormal heart rhythms.

It is *extremely* important to take beta-blockers as prescribed.⁷ Abruptly stopping these drugs can increase the risk of angina and even a heart attack. Other side effects include:

- ♥ lightheadedness
- ♥ depression
- ♥ fatigue
- ♥ memory loss

Calcium Channel Blockers

Calcium channel blockers are prescribed to treat angina and high blood pressure. Calcium channel blockers relax blood vessels and increase the supply of blood and oxygen to the heart, while reducing its workload. Some calcium channel blockers are used to help treat atrial fibrillation.

Calcium channel blockers are only used to treat heart failure caused by high blood pressure when other medications to lower blood pressure are ineffective.

Side effects of calcium channel blockers may include:⁸

- ♥ constipation
- ♥ headache
- ♥ rapid heartbeat (tachycardia)
- ♥ dizziness
- ♥ rash
- ♥ fatigue

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- ♥ flushing
- ♥ nausea
- ♥ swelling in the feet and lower legs

Cholesterol-Lowering Drugs

Cholesterol buildup in the walls of arteries (atherosclerosis) increases the risk of heart attack and stroke. Cholesterol-lowering drugs, such as statins, can reduce the risk of atherosclerosis.

Statins are generally well tolerated, but do have side effects.⁹ Most side effects tend to go away as the body adjusts to the medication. Common, less serious side effects may include:

- ♥ muscle and joint aches (most common)
- ♥ nausea
- ♥ diarrhea
- ♥ constipation

Potentially serious side effects can include:

- ♥ liver damage
- ♥ muscle problems
- ♥ increased blood sugar levels
- ♥ memory loss

Digoxin

Digoxin helps an injured or weakened heart to work more efficiently to send blood through the body. It strengthens the force of the heart muscle's contractions and may improve blood circulation.

It may also be prescribed if the patient has atrial fibrillation to help slow down the heart rate.

Common side effects may include:¹⁰

- ♥ dizziness
- ♥ fainting
- ♥ fast, pounding, or irregular heartbeat or pulse
- ♥ slow heartbeat

Diuretics

Diuretics, commonly known as “water pills,” cause the kidneys to get rid of unneeded water and salt from the tissues and bloodstream by sending these excesses into the urine. Getting rid of excess fluid makes it easier for the heart to pump. Diuretics are used to treat high blood pressure and reduce the swelling and water build-up caused by various medical problems, including heart failure. They also help make breathing easier.

The most common side effect of diuretics is increased urination.¹¹ Depending on the type of diuretic, it may also cause too much or too little potassium in the blood.