

BIOMEDICINE

From Philadelphia, at the annual meeting of the American Association for Cancer Research

Drug combination slows colon cancer

Aspirin and other nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs can retard the development of colorectal cancer. The medications appear to promote programmed cell death, a process that works against the runaway cell growth that is the hallmark of tumors. Two recent studies of patients have hinted that combining the drugs with cholesterol-lowering medication might enhance this effect.

A study of rats now confirms that suggestion. Researchers exposed 48 rats to chemicals that cause precancerous growths, then they divided the animals into four equal groups. One group received sulindac, a drug similar to aspirin, and a second got lovastatin, a cholesterol-lowering drug. The third group was given both drugs, and the fourth received no medication.

The sulindac group showed precancerous growth only 85 percent as extensive as in the rats with no medication, the lovastatin group 88 percent as much, and the rats treated with the combination 72 percent as much, says Banke Agarwal of St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York. "The combination was highly potent," he says.

Both lovastatin and anti-inflammatory drugs are already used to guard against heart attacks and strokes. However, many anti-inflammatories can cause ulcers. Agarwal suggests that some of the anti-inflammatory medication might be replaced with cholesterol-reducing drugs.

—N.S.