

Newsletter article

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Calcium channel blockers act on the flow of calcium in and out of cells. When calcium flows into muscle cells like those of the heart or blood vessel walls, the cells contract and the arteries narrow. Calcium channel blockers prevent calcium from entering the cells and therefore, heart and blood vessel wall muscles stay relaxed. As you might imagine, blood, therefore, flows more easily because there is less resistance, and blood *pressure* is reduced. Blood flow to the cardiac arteries also improves, which is why calcium channel blockers may be used to treat angina (chest pain). Certain calcium channel blockers slow the heart rate and decrease the force of heart contractions: for this reason, they may be used to treat heartbeat irregularities, such as atrial fibrillation. They are sometimes used to treat migraine headaches and Raynauds disease, in which blood circulation to the hands and feet is affected, because of their action of relaxing blood vessel walls.

Norvasc (amlodipine), Cardizem (diltiazem) , Procardia (nifedipine) and Calan (verapamil) are examples of calcium channel blockers. Possible side effects include: constipation, headache, rapid heartbeat, rash, drowsiness, flushing, nausea, and swelling in feet, legs or gums.

Each of the calcium channel blockers have a slightly different action. One may affect only the heart muscle, another only the blood vessel walls. Your physician will make the decision as to which one would be beneficial for you. It is very important to know why the medication has been prescribed and what the expected effect should be. Your doctor should be aware of all the other medications you are taking, including eye drops and over the counter medications. Certain calcium channel blockers can interact with other drugs and herbal remedies. Follow instructions from your doctor, nurse and pharmacists when taking any medications.