

Rx ANSWERS

WILKES
UNIVERSITY
PHARMACY
DEPARTMENT

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Popular pain medications: Help or harm?



A FULL YEAR after Merck voluntarily removed the popular pain medication Vioxx from the prescription drug market, doctors and patients are still concerned about the effects

that Vioxx and similar drugs have on health. In most instances, the occasional user should not panic. For years, drugs like Celebrex, Vioxx, Aleve (naproxen), and Advil (ibuprofen) have been used to treat pain.

They work well for many people, and have helped millions suffering from arthritis, headaches and other pain disorders. When Celebrex, Vioxx and Bextra (part of a class of drugs called COX-2 inhibitors) were approved for use in the late 1990s, physicians widely prescribed them not because they worked better, but because they were developed to be "safer" on the stomach than traditional medications such as Advil, Aleve and Indocin (Non-Steroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs or NSAIDs).

Why should we be concerned about taking these drugs? All of these drugs have side effects. NSAIDs are more likely to cause stomach ulcers or bleeding than Celebrex, but many other less serious side effects are similar between the drugs. The controversy surrounding the COX-2 inhibitors arose when recent studies showed that these drugs may be associated with a higher risk of strokes and heart problems. The effects on the heart were not known when the drugs were first approved for use. The result of these newer studies prompted the manufacturer of Vioxx (Merck) and the Food and Drug Administration to remove Vioxx and Bextra from the U.S. market. Celebrex, therefore, is the only COX-2 inhibitor available for use and is restricted to a maximal dose of 200mg a day.

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Current perspective

The FDA has not yet completed its review of the COX-2 inhibitors or the traditional NSAIDs. For now, the FDA has determined that short-term use (about 10 days) of NSAIDs or Celebrex is safe.

Many patients will need to continue taking these drugs for relief of long-term pain, but discussion about long-term therapy with an NSAID versus choosing an alternative treatment should be made with their provider.

Fortunately for the American public, medications developed over the past few decades have prevented, treated and cured countless disorders. However, we should all keep in mind that any medication can potentially cause harm and should be used with caution.

The current concern over the COX-2 inhibitors further highlights the need for patients and doctors to use drugs appropriately and watch for any problems when taking them. A provider and patient should be involved together in treating a particular problem, carefully weighing the benefit versus the risk of therapy.

If you still have questions, take the time to talk to your doctor or pharmacist about what to expect from taking your medication (4). This open-ended communication can be a big help in your search for the best care.

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University Faculty Members Participate in Nonprescription Medicines Academy

Kerry Cholka of The University of Pittsburgh, Amy Morgan of the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia, and Eric Wright of Wilkes University were recent participants in the Nonprescription Medicines Academy (NMA). Thirty-three faculty represented colleges and schools of pharmacy across the United States. This 3rd annual meeting of the Nonprescription Medicines Academy, held September 21-23 in Cincinnati, Ohio was initiated in 1998. This 2 1/2 day educational conference is planned exclusively for college of pharmacy faculty who provide instruction on nonprescription medicines. The goal of the conference is to facilitate a learning environment and networking opportunity to advance education and research in the area of nonprescription therapy. Only one faculty member from each school of college of pharmacy may be selected to participate.

The criteria for selection of participants in the conference require each faculty member to provide a brief oral presentation or poster during the Conference on an instructional innovation, project or research initiative in the area of nonprescription medicines. The topics presented varied from "Incorporating Web-based Technologies into a Nonprescription Drugs and Products Course" to

"Nonprescription Medication Print Advertisements as an Educational Tool" to "The Pharmacy Herbal/OTC Tour for Patients." Additional conference agenda items included presentations on instructional methodology with technology, new developments and regulatory requirements in the nonprescription industry, and developing a core curriculum on nonprescription medicines.

The Nonprescription Medicines Academy Conference is supported by Procter

and Gamble Health Care to help advance education and research in the area of nonprescription medicines. (For application materials for NMA 2001, contact Jenele Sobotka, Procter & Gamble Health Care, Pharmacy Relations Manager, 8700 Mason-Montgomery Road - Box 2074, Mason, OH 45040. Faculty who desire to advance the educational curriculum and research activities of nonprescription medicines are encouraged to apply.

