# Ibuprofen increases heart risk by a fifth

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Doctors are urged to study the treatment of patients who are taking painkillers called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs long termPRESS ASSOCIATION

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Common painkillers such as ibuprofen increase the risk of heart problems by a fifth, the largest study of its kind has found.

Drugs taken by millions of people over the counter and routinely prescribed by GPs can lead to patients being taken to hospital with heart failure, researchers concluded.

Doctors have been urged to review the treatment of patients taking the painkillers, called non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), long term and choose other options for those at risk of heart problems.

Occasional use of the drugs for aches and pains is unlikely to be a problem. Some experts have called for a ban on selling the drugs in supermarkets and corner shops where patients cannot get advice from a pharmacist, however.

The NHS dispenses 14 million prescriptions for NSAIDs every year, mainly for ibuprofen, naproxen and diclofenac. They are most often taken for joint pain. Ibuprofen and naproxen are available over the counter but diclofenac is prescription-only because of concerns about heart problems. Paracetamol is an alternative but it can be less effective.

Fears were first raised about heart attacks and strokes a decade ago and evidence of their link to NSAIDs has been growing. The latest study, involving ten million patients across Europe, looked at the risk of heart failure — a problem pumping blood around the body that affects more than half a million mainly older people in Britain.

The study compared the effects of different drugs. People taking ibuprofen regularly were 18 per cent more likely to suffer heart failure, with those on high doses twice as likely to need hospital treatment, a pan-European group of researchers report in *The BMJ*.

“Our findings, which focused only on prescription NSAIDs, might apply to NSAIDs obtained over the counter as well,” the researchers conclude. “Although over-the-counter NSAIDs are probably typically used at lower doses, by younger people, and for shorter durations than prescribed NSAIDs, they are sometimes available at the same doses as those prescribed and may be inappropriately overused. Therefore, our findings could have large-scale consequences in public health.”

Martin Johnson, of the Royal College of GPs, said that those taking NSAIDs regularly needed to be monitored by a pharmacist or GP and those at higher risk of heart problems might be advised to try alternatives. He added: “We always have to question: are we taking drugs out of necessity or out of habit? We are a pill-popping society. It’s easy to go to the chemist, get a quick fix and go away.”

Peter Weissberg, medical director of the British Heart Foundation, said: “Since heart and joint problems often coexist, particularly in the elderly, this study serves as a reminder to doctors to consider carefully how they prescribe NSAIDs, and to patients that they should only take the lowest effective dose for the shortest possible time.” NSAIDs are thought to affect the heart by making the kidneys retain more salt in the body, as well as making blood pressure drugs less effective.

Gunnar Gislason, of Copenhagen University Hospital, wrote in *The BMJ:* “A more restricted policy by regulatory authorities on the availability of NSAIDs and requirements for healthcare professionals providing advice on their use and potential harm is warranted.”

**Q&A**

**What are NSAIDs?** Drugs that block key enzymes involved in tissue inflammation.

**Which drugs are we talking about?**The class includes dozens of medicines. The most common are aspirin, naproxen, ibuprofen and diclofenac. GPs are advised to use naproxen in the first instance for many types of pain. It is available over the counter, including under the brand name Feminax Ultra.

**Which is the most dangerous?** The average NSAID was linked to a 19 per cent higher risk of hospital treatment for heart failure. Ibuprofen and naproxen appear slightly less dangerous, with an 18 and 16 per cent increased risk respectively.

**What does this mean?** The figures suggest NSAIDs lead to an extra 37.5 hospital admissions for heart failure per 10,000 people taking them each year.

**Are these risks already known?** Use has fallen substantially since links to heart problems and gut bleeds emerged more than a decade ago.

**What are the alternatives?** Mainly paracetamol. Opioids are an option for severe pain, but these come with their own risks, including addiction.