Heart attacks linked to common NSAID painkillers

NSAID painkillers are associated with increased heart attack risk. (Pixabay)

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Commonly used [NSAID painkillers](https://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm107856.htm) such as ibuprofen (sold under the brand name Advil) are associated with increased risk of heart attacks starting as early as the first week of use, [according to a study published this week](https://www.eurekalert.org/emb_releases/2017-05/b-hro050517.php).

The heightened risk reaches its peak during the first month of use and then levels off, the report said, and higher doses were associated with greater risk. The risk declines after people stop using these medications.

While the observational — published in BMJ, formerly the British Medical Journal — cannot determine cause and effect, it reinforces previous warnings about potential harm from NSAIDs. The analysis can be found at [j.mp/nsaidmi](http://j.mp/nsaidmi).

“All NSAIDs, including naproxen, were found to be associated with an increased risk of acute myocardial infarction,” the study stated. “Risk of myocardial infarction with celecoxib was comparable to that of traditional NSAIDS and was lower than for rofecoxib.”

Ibuprofen and naproxen are sold over the counter generically and through the respective brand names of Motrin and Aleve. The prescription drug celecoxib is sold under the brand name Celebrex.

Rofecoxib, better known through its brand name of Vioxx, was taken off the market in 2004 due to cardiovascular risks.

The new warning extends to diclofenac, sold over the counter and prescribed under the brand names of Zipsor, Zorvolex, Voltaren and Cataflam.

The researchers also highlighted the aspect of high dosages.

“Use for 8-30 days at a high dose was particularly harmful for ibuprofen (more than 1,200 milligrams per day), naproxen ( more than 750 milligrams per day) and rofecoxib (more than 25 milligrams per day),” the study said.

Michèle Bally of the University of Montreal Hospital Research Center led the analysis. At the time, she was an epidemiology doctoral student at McGill University in Canada.

The higher heart risk from Vioxx may explain why the cardiovascular problems associated with the NSAID class were first discovered in that drug, the report said. “Our study suggests a smaller risk of myocardial infarction exists with all other NSAIDs,” it stated.

Aspirin, technically an NSAID, is the great exception. The granddaddy of painkillers is known to have cardioprotective effects — [and has long been prescribed by physicians for that purpose](http://www.webmd.com/heart-disease/guide/aspirin-therapy#1).

[Previous studies](https://academic.oup.com/eurheartj/article/27/14/1635/2887334/NSAIDS-and-the-risk-of-myocardial-infarction-do) also had pointed to a [heightened risk](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3042333/) of heart attack from [NSAIDs](https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2013-06/elar-hpo061013.php).

In the new report, researchers reviewed four other studies that had looked at the general population or the elderly in Canada and Europe.  
“This patient level meta-analysis of acute myocardial infarction associated with NSAIDs involving 61,460 cases in 446,763 individuals is the largest investigation of its type, and its real-world origin helps ensure that findings are broadly generalizable,” the new study said.

**(See also:**[**A third of drugs got extra safety warnings after they were already on the market**](http://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/business/biotech/sd-me-drug-safety-20170509-story.html)**).**