One week of painkillers can increase chances of heart attack, new study finds

[3 Comments](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2017/05/09/one-week-painkillers-can-increase-chances-heart-attack-new-study/#comments)

* [Henry Bodkin](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/henry-bodkin/)

9 MAY 2017 • 11:30PM

Taking common painkillers such as ibuprofen for only a week can significantly raise the risk of having a heart attack, a major new study suggests.

Patients are being urged to limit their use of the drugs for as short a period as possible after they were linked to increased heart attack chances of more than 50 per cent.

Scientists already suspected a [connection between potentially fatal cardiac event](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/07/11/ibuprofen-can-trigger-heart-failure-experts-warn/)s and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medicines, which also include diclofenac and naproxen.

But there was uncertainty as to how long a patient could take the drugs before putting themselves at added risk.

The new investigation, the largest ever of its kind, found anti-inflammatories may boost the chances of having a heart attack as early as in the first week of use.

They found a particularly strong connection within the first month.

Published in the British Medical Journal, the study urges doctors to weigh up the risks against the benefits of prescribing the drugs.

Because of the observational nature of the research, which examined the prescribing data and health outcomes of more than 446,000 people, scientists cannot say for sure why anti-inflammatories are linked to greater heart attack risk.

Previous research, however, has suggested the link may involve the drugs blocking in hormone called prostacylin, which protects blood vessels.

Dr Mike Knapton, associate medical director at the British Heart Foundation, said: "This large-scale study worryingly highlights just how quickly you become at risk of having a heart attack after starting NSAIDs (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs).

"Whether you are being prescribed painkillers like ibuprofen, or buying them over the counter, people must be made aware of the risk and alternative medication should be considered where appropriate."

The research team from Canada, Finland and Germany said there was a "a rapid onset of risk" for heart attack within the first week of use, while risk was highest during the first month of taking the painkillers.

However, using the drugs for longer than one month did not increase risk more compared to shorter use.

Meanwhile the added chances of a heart attack were more pronounced among users on high doses of the painkillers.

Use for between eight and 30 days at a high dose was "particularly harmful" when people were taking more than 1,200mg a day of ibuprofen, 750mg a day of naproxen and more than 25mg a day of rofecoxib.

Overall, a person’s chances of having a heart attack in any given year while taking anti-inflammatories is 1 per cent, the study found.

Prof Jane Mitchell, Head of Cardiothoracic Pharmacology, Imperial College London, said: “These painkillers include some of the most commonly taken drugs worldwide and although the increased risk of heart attack might be low, because of the scale of their use it is seen as an important problem.

“Patients, doctors and drug companies are worried – concern over an increased risk of heart attacks associated with drugs like celecoxib or ibuprofen has slowed drug development in this area to a virtual stand-still.

“We should also remember that there is some evidence some of these drugs may help prevent some cancers but they are not used because of concerns over side effects.”

The scientific community has stressed that the new BMJ study does not prove a causal link between painkillers and heart attack, pointing out that there may be other factors connecting to the two.

For example, the increased heart attack risk may be caused by the complaint which prompts a person to take painkillers, rather than by the painkillers themselves.