A week on common painkillers may increase heart attack risk

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Common painkillers such as ibuprofen raise your risk of a heart attack by about 50 per cent as soon as you start taking them, the first study of its kind suggests.

Even people taking the occasional tablet for backache have been warned to consider alternatives and not assume that drugs are totally safe because they can be bought easily at a supermarket.

While previous research has established a heart risk for long-term use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), the latest study suggests that problems appear even in the first week of use.

Patients have been urged not to panic because the overall risk is low, amounting to about a 1 per cent chance of a heart attack in a year if taking the tablets daily. However, researchers say that people ought to be aware of the risk.

The NHS dispenses almost 15 million of these anti-inflammatories on prescription each year, mainly ibuprofen, naproxen and diclofenac. The last of these is now prescription-only because of concerns about heart problems.

Evidence of a link to heart risks has been accumulating for a decade and the latest study looked at data on 447,000 people in three countries, including Britain, about 61,000 of whom had heart attacks.

Taking any dose was found to increase the risk even in the first seven days of regular use, Canadian scientists report in *The BMJ*. Although the study cannot prove the drugs directly caused heart attacks, any dose of ibuprofen was linked to an immediate 48 per cent increase in risk, rising to 75 per cent for a high dose for a month. The risk fell back to normal within a year of stopping the drugs.

Michèle Bally, of the University of Montreal hospital research centre, who led the study, urged people “not to pop these medicines without considering it”. She said it was vital to make people aware of the risk without terrifying them, because more restrained use of the drugs could prevent heart attacks.

She said: “For an individual the risk is extremely low so we would want to reassure people. The idea is to make them aware that if they take these medicines on an occasional basis you should consider alternatives. Should you use physio, or not treat your pain because it’s not that bad?”

Doctors have previously said sales of these drugs should be restricted to pharmacies where advice on risks can be given and Dr Bally said: “I think it’s something that regulatory authorities might want to consider.”

Mike Knapton, associate medical director of the British Heart Foundation, said: “This study highlights how quickly you become at risk of having a heart attack after starting NSAIDS. People must be made aware and alternative medication considered.”

John Smith, chief executive of the manufacturers’ group the Proprietary Association of Great Britain, said people taking low doses of NSAIDs occasionally should not be concerned. “The study also showed that after patients had taken their last prescribed dose, their risk of heart attack decreased over time back to normal levels of risk, which indicates the NSAIDs had no lasting effect on someone’s probability of suffering a heart attack.”