

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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## “NSAID Drugs: Do They Increase Risk of Heart Attacks and Strokes ?”

Some say, "There is no such thing as a safe medication." Medications are a risk vs. benefit judgment. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has strengthened existing label warnings for non-aspirin, nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), which are taken by millions and are used to treat pain or fever. The over-the-counter forms include Advil, Motrin IB and [Aleve](#). NSAIDs include naproxen, ibuprofen, diclofenac, celecoxib, etoricoxib and lumiracoxib. The prescription forms tend to be stronger and are used to treat arthritis and other painful conditions. Prescription non-aspirin NSAID labels first included "Boxed Warning" and "Warnings and Precaution" sections in 2005. Since that time, the FDA reviewed new safety information on prescription and OTC (over the counter) NSAIDs. The studies estimated that the relative risk increased by 10% to 50%, depending on the drugs and the doses considered. The updated labels for prescription NSAIDs will include the following information: 1) Heart attack or stroke risk can increase as early as the first weeks of NSAID use, and the risk may increase with longer NSAID use. The risk appears to be greater at higher doses. 2) A large number of studies show that patients with or without heart disease or risk factors for heart disease are at increased risk for heart attack or stroke. 3) In general, the risk for heart attack or stroke after NSAID use is greater in patients with heart disease or risk factors for it because their risk is higher at baseline. 4) Patients who take NSAIDs after a first heart attack were more likely to die in the year after the heart attack compared with those who did not take NSAIDs after their first heart attack. 5) Patients are at increased risk for heart failure with NSAID use. 6) Although the risk was previously thought to be similar for all NSAIDs, more recent information calls this into question. The FDA now says that there is insufficient information to determine whether the risk is higher or lower for one NSAID compared with another. The FDA recommends that patients and healthcare professionals remain alert for cardiac adverse effects for the duration of NSAID use. Those taking NSAIDs should seek immediate medical attention if they have symptoms including chest pain, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, weakness in one part or side of their body, or slurred speech. The FDA requires the drug labels of all prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) NSAIDs to reflect the increased risk. Prescription and OTC non-aspirin NSAIDs already include information about the risk for heart attack and stroke with NSAIDs, either of which can lead to death.

In the America that I love, I recommend taking the smallest effective dose of medications for the shortest time possible.

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