

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Acid Reflux Drugs Linked to Bad Side Effects”

An estimated 20 percent of Americans suffer from acid reflux, or gastroesophageal reflux, both often referred to as “heartburn.” Acid reflux drugs, known as proton pump inhibitors (PPIs), include lansoprazole (**Prevacid**), manufactured by Novartis, as well as esomeprazole (**Nexium**) and omeprazole (**Prilosec**), both manufactured by AstraZeneca. Millions of U.S. residents take proton pump inhibitors (PPI), which are widely prescribed to treat heartburn, ulcers and other gastrointestinal problems. This class of medication has been available for commercial use for nearly 25 years. Both PPIs and H2 blockers (histamine-2–receptor antagonists (H2RA) are prescribed for serious medical conditions, such as upper GI tract bleeding, gastroesophageal reflux disease and esophageal cancer. Over-the-counter PPIs are most often used for heartburn and indigestion. Although the recommended treatment regimen for most PPIs is short—two to eight weeks for ulcers, for example—many people end up taking the drugs for months or years. PPIs are some of the most widely prescribed drugs in the U.S., with \$14 billion in annual sales. However, there have been emerging concerns with reports of potential adverse effects associated with use of PPIs. In the United States, such reports have led the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to issue many broad-based product warnings, including all of the available PPI drugs either for prescription or over-the-counter purchase. The potential PPI harmful interactions have ranged from alteration of absorption of vitamins and minerals, metabolic effects on bone density, alteration of pharmacokinetics/pharmacodynamics and related drug interactions, or alterations of intended effect, infection risk, hypersensitivity response with consequent organ damage and death. Reportedly, proton pump inhibitors increase the risk of heart attack in the general population by about 15 to 20 percent. So, that stinging sensation in the chest may be more than just heartburn for those taking certain antacids. Other known side effects of PPIs include vitamin B12 deficiency and susceptibility to hip, wrist or spinal fractures. Over-the-counter PPIs contain the same chemical compounds as in prescription PPIs, just at lower doses, and there is no way to know how long people stay on them. The FDA recommends taking PPIs no longer than four weeks before consulting a physician. For some patients it may be possible to reduce acid reflux symptoms without medication, using strategies including weight loss and cutting down on alcohol, cigarettes, highly acidic foods and late-night snacks. Sleeping with the head elevated and wearing comfortable, non-restrictive clothing can also help.

In the America that I love, if you are taking these medications, do not panic. There is considerable variation in studies and in many cases, proof is still lacking. However, as usual, take medications only as necessary and for the shortest time period. Overuse of PPIs is expensive and potentially dangerous.

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