

Drugs in the Media

By Rebecca White, MD

Vioxx was taken off the market two months ago in a fanfare of media attention. Now the names of drugs such as Bextra, Celebrex and Naproxen are hitting the airwaves. What is the information behind these controversial drugs?

Vioxx, Bextra, Celebrex, and Naproxen are all nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), commonly known as “arthritis” medications, or painkillers. Basically, they all reduce swelling and pain. Vioxx, Bextra, and Celebrex are a subset of NSAIDs called COX-2 inhibitors, named after the enzyme they block. Initially, the COX-2 inhibitors were thought not to cause ulcers like the other NSAIDs, and so had been used particularly in people with ulcer history. Naproxen is an NSAID in use for many years, now in the widely used over the counter pain reliever Aleve.

Concern about Vioxx occurred during an extended research trial designed to see if Vioxx could help prevent colon cancer. This research resulted in concern of increasing heart attack, which finally lead the makers to remove Vioxx from the market. The controversy is now about whether similar drugs have these same risks. Naproxen’s most recent scrutinization came from a study intending to understand if it would afford protection from developing Alzheimer’s. Although results have been mixed, there was some evidence that the people taking Naproxen also had an increased risk for having a heart attack.

There has been much talk about the danger in taking these medications. Studies trying to answer this question are now ongoing, but that does not help the consumer. They must make decisions on what medications they should use now. To try to put perspective on this decision process it is helpful to consider two issues. First, remember that the studies that showed the problem involved many people, yet it took a long time for the problem to become evident. This means that although the “relative risk” is increased, the “absolute risk” is small and the chance of having a problem in any one person is low. Second, since the concern is in increase of heart attack and similar problems, it is more important in people with risk for heart disease to avoid these drugs. To illustrate this consider living in Unalaska and the risk of drowning in cold water. When compared to those living on the mainland of Alaska, living in Unalaska gives a large relative risk of drowning in cold water, yet the actual number of residents who do drown in cold water—the absolute risk—is quite small. To carry this a step further, people who are not out on the water has even smaller absolute risk and so need to worry about this possibility even less. The medical would say it is dangerous to live in Unalaska because the greater increased risk of drowning in cold water. Residents here understand the absolute risk. Each consumer likewise must analyze their absolute risk of taking these medications are make individual choices.

There is a separate concern for Bextra. It has now been found that Bextra can cause a severe rash, particularly during the first two weeks of therapy. Anyone taking Bextra who develops hives, swelling, or rash should stop the drug and report this to their physician immediately. When Bextra was first tested, it was felt it could be used in people allergic to sulfa antibiotics. This is now known not to be true. Bextra should not be used in people with true sulfa allergy. This does not include people who are allergic to sulphates found in food.

In summary, all medications have risks. The best way to decide what medications are right for you is to discuss your options with your health care professional, who is familiar with your personal medical history.