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Answers to your Questions about Digestive Health

Long-term Use of Proton Pump Inhibitor Medication and GERD

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If you have a question about your digestive health, please contact us at IFFGD, PO Box 170864, Milwaukee, WI 53217. This information is provided for general information and is not intended to replace your doctor's advice.

Question – Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs) have been widely used for the treatment of gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) since 1989. These drugs have proven to be highly effective. They allow rapid resolution of symptoms and healing of the esophagus in 80–90% of patients, and are also useful in managing stricture, one of the more serious complications of GERD. However, a recently published research study suggests that taking proton pump inhibitors for prolonged periods may increase the risk of developing pneumonia. A Dutch study of 364,000 patients, published in the October 27, 2004 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association, found the risk of pneumonia nearly doubled for people taking the drugs for prolonged periods. What does this mean for those who use the drugs?

Answer – We have been treating medical illnesses with medications that suppress stomach (gastric) acid since 1976. In 1989, omeprazole, a proton pump inhibitor (PPI) that profoundly decreases gastric acid was released in the United States. There were great fears that this powerful medication would cause numerous, serious side effects. After more than 15 years, none of these problems have come to pass. There have been no epidemics of stomach cancer, esophageal cancer, or nutritional deficiencies. Omeprazole, once restricted to be used for only eight weeks, is now available over the counter. There are at least three forms available by prescription. There are 4 other PPI's available by prescription. Few types of medications can match the PPI's for their safety and efficacy.

The development of serious infections was an original concern about the PPI's, too. Many bacteria enter our bodies through the GI tract. Gastric acid kills most of those bacteria before they cause a problem. If one takes a PPI on a regular basis, theoretically, one would be at greater risk of infection. Most of the original research in this area was done in critically ill, hospitalized patients. While some of the data were conflicting, the majority of the research showed that using gastric acid suppression did not lead to more serious infections.

Recently, an interesting article in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) showed that ambulatory patients taking acid suppressing medications have a greater risk of developing pneumonia. This was a Dutch study that evaluated 364,683 patients, 5551 of whom developed pneumonia over an 8-year period. By reviewing the medical records, they were compared to a group of patients who did not develop pneumonia. Patients who had ever used gastric acid suppressing drugs were 4.5 times more likely to develop pneumonia compared to the general population. However, several things need to be pointed out. Patients that were actually taking acid suppression were a little less than twice as likely to develop pneumonia. Patients with pneumonia were also more likely to have diabetes, heart failure, lung disease, be taking immune suppressing medications, and more frequently used antibiotics in the previous year. There was no mention of the outcome, such as the seriousness of the pneumonia, or if any deaths occurred. The authors estimated that, at worst, there was only one episode of pneumonia that may be directly attributable to a PPI for every 100 patient-years of treatment!

This new information simply calls for some common sense. You should not be taking medications that you don't need. Ask your doctor if you need to be taking powerful medications, like the PPI's, to control your heartburn or indigestion. Ask if your dose could be decreased. Be more vigilant if you have diabetes, heart failure, lung disease, or another systemic illness. Most patients will need to stay on their medications, which is fine. Even if there is a risk of developing pneumonia as a result of taking a PPI, that risk is extremely small.

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