

ACHY MUSCLES, BREAKY HEART

Got killer pain? Hold that painkiller... a natural alternative may be safer.

Listen up, weekend warriors, road runners and sports fanatics: Think you can beat tough gym days, long runs and heavy lifts by reaching for that bottle of relief in a pill? Think again. If you're one of more than 30 million Americans who use NSAIDs every day, your favorite painkiller could put you on the DL. Renowned cardiologist Dr. Michael Ozner explains why.

Q. WHAT ARE NSAIDS AND HOW DO THEY WORK?

NSAIDs are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, and include medications such as Advil, Motrin and Aleve. They typically treat acute pain and inflammation, whether from the cold and flu, or joint and muscle pain. NSAIDs work by inhibiting certain enzymes called cyclo-oxygenases (COX-1 and 2), which allow prostaglandin synthesis. Prostaglandins start an inflammatory response at the site of injured tissue, relaying pain to the brain and recruiting various cells in the body for an immune response. If these are blocked, pain and inflammation are reduced.

Q. MOST OF US TAKE NSAIDS ON A REGULAR BASIS. HOW SAFE ARE THEY?

NSAIDs are terribly overused in this country and carry real risks. While NSAIDs reduce inflammation, blocking prostaglandins can stop other potentially healthy responses. Prostaglandins support platelet formation, protect the stomach lining from acids and maintain normal blood flow to the kidneys. And NSAIDs also block the formation of prostacyclins, which help regulate vascular health, including inhibiting platelet aggregation, hypertension, atherogenesis and cardiac dysfunction. While they are effective anti-inflammatories, NSAIDs can also cause peripheral edema, hypertension, and worsen established hypertension by inhibiting the kidneys' ability to excrete water and salt. If NSAIDs are absolutely necessary, always

check with your doctor. To minimize one's risk, I recommend taking the lowest effective dose for the shortest possible duration.

Q. WHAT ABOUT THOSE OF US WHO HAVE A CARDIOVASCULAR CONDITION AND TAKE ASPIRIN ON A REGULAR BASIS, BUT STILL HAVE JOINT PAIN FROM EXERCISING?

Regular exercise can demand a lot of our muscles, joints and bodies. However, most physicians feel it is unreasonable for people to take NSAIDs on a daily basis to prevent joint pain or inflammation. And yet many healthy exercisers are doing so. This can potentially lead to serious problems, such as heart attack, sudden death and/or kidney failure. If someone truly needs something medicinal, say post-surgery or for an injury, then the risk/benefit ratio may be worth taking a short course of NSAIDs. But NSAIDs should not be a lifetime prescription. That is where we are getting into trouble. Tylenol, which is not an NSAID, does not increase the potential for clotting, but can increase one's risk for liver failure if taken on a regular basis.

And be careful if you have to take low-dose aspirin for heart protection. When taken together with certain NSAIDs, the two drugs compete to block the COX enzymes, resulting in a potentially dangerous imbalance and a decrease in aspirin's cardioprotective effects.

Q. WHAT SHOULD ACTIVE EXERCISERS TAKE INSTEAD ON A REGULAR BASIS?

Fish oil! The healthy, natural anti-inflammatory "drugs," such as fish oil and foods rich in omega-3 fatty acids, help decrease inflammation, while also decreasing blood pressure and the risk of heart attack. Research has shown that maintaining a healthy balance of your omega-3s and omega-6s reduces arthritis and arthralgia (joint pain).



DR. OZNER'S TIPS TO REDUCE EXERCISE ACES AND PAINS

Look to the Mediterranean: Diet that is! This regional fare is proven to benefit the heart and have strong anti-inflammatory properties, partly because it is high in omega-3 fats. The easiest way to get the benefits is to eat a diet rich in omega-3s (providing heart-healthy eicosapentaenoic and alpha-linoleic acids), such as fatty, cold-water fishes, chia seeds, flaxseed, walnuts and canola oil.

Take your fish oil: If you aren't getting enough omega fats from your diet, fish oil supplements may be useful. It has a number of beneficial effects based on its high levels of—yep, you guessed it—omega-3s. Dosages will vary depending on your needs and diet, but a supplement of fish oil may be a great way to stay healthy and help control inflammation. Your physician can help you to decide how much and how often.

Be conservative: If you need an NSAID, take the lowest dose for the shortest amount of time you can.