

## Comment on NSAIDs, Arthritis and Cardiovascular Health

Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) play an important role in the management of pain and inflammation in many forms of arthritis. Over the past several years, considerable attention has been paid to the fact that these drugs increase the risk of serious cardiovascular complications, including heart attacks and strokes. As a result, all NSAIDs other than aspirin now carry an FDA-mandated warning regarding the risk of cardiovascular side effects.

The American Heart Association recently developed guidelines for the treatment of people with arthritis and musculoskeletal disease who have (or are at high risk for) cardiovascular disease. The guidance emphasizes the range of treatment options which are available and, in particular, calls attention to the heightened risk of cardiovascular complications of NSAIDs in this population of patients. The guidance stresses that NSAIDs should be used with caution in these patients, and that all patients taking NSAIDs should be carefully monitored for the development of high blood pressure, worsening kidney function, fluid retention and gastrointestinal bleeding. In addition, the recommendations suggest that low-dose aspirin should be considered, especially in patients taking selective COX-2 inhibitors.

The Arthritis Foundation recognizes the importance of minimizing the risks of side effects from NSAIDs, but believes that little attention has been paid to the seriousness of arthritis or the need to balance drug benefits and risks in this discussion. Pain and joint limitations associated with arthritis profoundly affect the lives of millions of people, including children, in this country. These individuals want to play an active role in decisions made about their treatment and want to be given the opportunity to be fully informed about the potential benefits and risks of all available treatment options to relieve their pain and reduce their risk of disability.

We believe that the development of an appropriate and effective plan of arthritis management using NSAIDs must take into consideration several things:

- Not all forms of arthritis or related musculoskeletal diseases are treated the same. It is therefore important that an accurate diagnosis be established and the full range of treatment options available should be considered before deciding on a course of treatment.
- If used appropriately and monitored carefully, NSAIDs are important, effective and safe drugs for the treatment of many forms of arthritis.
- There are a number of different NSAIDs available, including both prescription and over the counter (OTC) drugs. Patients often need to try courses of several different drugs to best determine which of the available drugs most effectively controls their pain and improves joint function.
- NSAIDs like all medications have potential side effects that must be considered and accepted in deciding to take the medication.

- The risk of side effects of NSAIDs appears to increase with higher doses of the drug. The Arthritis Foundation recommends that patients take the lowest dose possible of NSAIDs that best controls their symptoms. The Arthritis Foundation also advises that patients not abruptly stop their medication or alter their dosage without first speaking with their doctor. In no instance should someone take more than the prescribed or recommended dose of these medications.

“The challenge for patients with chronic forms of arthritis pain is to assess the risks and benefits of any treatment accurately,” said Dr. Patience White, chief public health officer of the Arthritis Foundation. “The Arthritis Foundation encourages patients to raise concerns regarding use of all medications with their physicians and to individualize treatment choices. Choosing among treatment alternatives is accomplished most effectively and with greatest safety when patients are fully informed regarding the risks and benefits of all potential treatments. It is important to understand as much as possible about the pros and cons of any treatment plan and to work closely with your physician in medication choices.”

### **About The Arthritis Foundation**

The Arthritis Foundation is the leading health organization addressing the needs of some 46 million Americans living with arthritis. Founded in 1948, with headquarters in Atlanta, the Arthritis Foundation has 44 chapters and 150 community service points located throughout the country.

The Arthritis Foundation is the largest private, not-for-profit contributor to arthritis research in the world, funding more than \$380 million in research grants since 1948. The foundation helps individuals take control of arthritis by providing public health education; pursuing public policy and legislation; and conducting evidence-based programs to improve the quality of life for those living with arthritis. Information is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week at 1-800-568-4045 or [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org).

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