

Possible link with Viagra and sudden vision loss

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After over 40 incidents of sudden, irreversible vision loss among users of the drug Viagra and other similar drugs which treat impotency, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is investigating whether the drugs can cause a rare kind of sudden blindness.

FDA officials are now in talks with Pfizer Inc., the maker of Viagra, about adding the new information to its product label.

But worrying though the incidents are, both the agency and Pfizer say it is unclear whether the drug was actually associated with the blindness as many Viagra users suffer from diabetes and high blood pressure, which are conditions that have been previously linked to a similar sudden vision loss.

Sudden blindness is caused by the blockage of blood flow to the optic nerve and is most common in older people, the ones more likely to use Viagra. Upto an estimated 6,000 Americans suffer an optic blockage each year.

Pfizer estimates that about 23 million men worldwide have taken the drug and the company says that a review of 103 clinical trials with Viagra involving 13,000 patients found no reports of the sudden blindness, known as non-arteritic anterior ischemic optic neuropathy (NAION).

Suzanne Trevino a spokeswoman for the FDA, also says that it has not been determined that there is a cause and effect due to these drugs. She says the FDA is working with the company to ensure that this information is available to doctors and patients.

Impotence drugs Viagra, Cialis and Levitra, already have warnings that the drug can cause, among other side effects, minor vision changes that include blurring, sensitivity to light and the presence of a bluish tinge to objects. The makers of Cialis, Eli Lilly & Co. and Icos Corp., have already voluntarily added a notice about the risk of sudden blindness to their label.

Howard Pomeranz, director of neuro-ophthalmology at the University of Minnesota Medical School, is the scientist who spotted the possible link between Viagra and sudden blindness.

The impotence drugs work by slightly dilating arteries so the flow of blood increases to the penis and Pomeranz says that the drug could be having a similar effect on the optic nerve, but he also says that a definitive cause-and-effect link has not been established.

Although the number of reported cases of sudden blindness among users of Viagra and other impotence drugs is very small, it is possible that other men taking the medications are likely to have had similar reactions. Doctors are not required to report adverse drug reactions, and public health officials believe that the government learns about only 10 percent of them.