

Study: Vioxx users had triple heart risk

By Rita Rubin, USA TODAY
December 6, 2004

A study out Tuesday found that Vioxx users were nearly three times more likely to suffer a heart attack than people taking Celebrex, a similar pain reliever. But an accompanying editorial in the medical journal cautions that patients at risk for heart disease still should not take Celebrex or other drugs in its class until doctors know how Vioxx raised heart attack risk.

Merck, maker of Vioxx, took the arthritis drug off the market Sept. 30 after a company-sponsored study found more heart attacks and strokes in patients who took the drug than in those on a placebo.

Vioxx's exit left Celebrex and Bextra — both made by Pfizer — the only so-called COX-2 inhibitor drugs on the U.S. market. The drugs' selling point has been that they are safer on the digestive tract than traditional non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs, such as ibuprofen.

In the new study, posted on the Web site of the Annals of Internal Medicine, researchers compared medication use of patients admitted to the hospital with a first, non-fatal heart attack with that of individuals who had not had a heart attack. Each of the 1,718 heart attack patients was matched with four randomly selected people from the same geographic region who had not had a heart attack.

The study did not find that Vioxx use increased the rate of heart attacks but rather that Celebrex use appeared to decrease it. But lead author Stephen Kimmel, a cardiologist and epidemiologist at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, says the Celebrex finding could be a "false positive" accredited to chance.

"I wouldn't want anyone to think they should be taking Celebrex because it's good for their heart," he says.

Axel Finckh, co-author of an accompanying editorial, says it's not yet clear what's behind the increased risk of cardiovascular problems in Vioxx users. So, says Finckh, a rheumatologist at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital, patients at risk for a heart attack would be wise to avoid using any COX-2 inhibitor, unless they also are at great risk for digestive tract problems. Even then, Finckh says, patients could take a traditional NSAID with another medication to protect the digestive tract.

Pfizer spokeswoman Mariann Caprino would not comment on Finckh's recommendation. "We believe that the most appropriate forum for discussing the data and the interpretation of the data is the upcoming FDA advisory meeting," Caprino said, referring to a meeting in February to discuss COX-2 inhibitors