

Heartburn Medication is Again Linked to Fatal Risks

Heartburn has been in the news a lot lately – and we're not referring to the type you might experience while watching a talking head or pundit on CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC.

Rather, we're referencing recent reports that drugs commonly used to alleviate symptoms associated with heartburn, gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), acid reflux, and stomach and small intestine ulcers, may raise the risk of numerous fatal health conditions. Among these risks are cardiovascular disease, chronic kidney disease, and upper gastrointestinal cancer.



One such study – [*Estimates of mortality associated with proton pump inhibitors among US veterans*](#) – was published in May of 2019 in the *British Medical Journal*. In that peer-reviewed study, researchers from the Department of Veterans Affairs-Saint Louis,

Saint Louis University, and Washington University School of Medicine in Saint Louis concluded taking *proton pump inhibitors* (PPIs) is associated with a small excess of cause-specific mortality, including death in 45 out of every 1,000 people taking these drugs due to the above-mentioned medical risks.

Previous studies, including one published in 2006 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, concluded [long-term PPI therapy is associated with an increased risk of hip fracture.](#)

Understanding Heartburn and Proton Pump Inhibitors

Heartburn – which is also referred to as *acid indigestion* – is that uncomfortable experience wherein the contents of your stomach reverse course and back up into the esophagus. And, because the stomach's strong digestive mechanism produces acid, the influx of partially broken-down foodstuff results in a sour, unpleasant taste experience in the back of the mouth or even the tongue.

Proton pump inhibitors (PPIs), first developed in the 1980s, were designed to treat acid-related disorders such as acid indigestion/heartburn and related discomfort in the upper gastrointestinal tract. According to data from the U.S. National Institutes of Health, between 15 to 20 million adults in the United States now use prescription PPIs to treat gastrointestinal (GI) disorders to reduce the excessive production of acid.

Technically speaking, PPIs inhibit active parietal cell acid secretion. Said differently, PPIs are designed to reduce the production of acid in the wall of the stomach, thereby preventing ulcers and assisting in the healing of ulcers that exist on the esophagus, stomach, or small intestine.

The brand names of the drugs referred to in the Saint Louis study referenced above may be familiar to you. They include:

- Aciphex (Rabeprazole)
- Dexilant (Dexlansoprazole)
- Nexium (Esomeprazole)
- Prevacid (Lansoprazole)
- Prilosec (Omeprazole)
- Protonix (Pantoprazole)
- Zegerid (Omeprazole and sodium bicarbonate)

Additionally, the research – which was funded by grants from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs and the Institute for Public Health at Washington University in Saint Louis – found that more than 50 percent of the people taking PPIs did so without a documented medical need. Researchers also found out that around 80 percent of people who consume PPIs, consume low doses of the prescription drugs referenced above – roughly equivalent to dosages commonly found in over-the-counter versions of those same drugs.

Functional Medicine's Approach to Heartburn

At BioDesign Wellness Center, we are a [Tampa Functional Medicine practice](#) that is devoted to discovering – and then treating – the root causes of issues such as heartburn, acid reflux, and GI disorders. And we're hesitant to prescribe medical-grade PPIs or even recommend taking over-the-counter versions. In our opinion, consuming PPIs just isn't safe, especially when other approaches that address the symptoms these drugs are supposed to alleviate are readily available.

The 5 Pillars of Health – which account for the role of detoxification, nutrition, hormones, nervous system, and exercise in a healthy system – play a significant role in how we uncover and treat the underlying causes of heartburn, acid

reflux, and GERD. Within three months of treatment here at BioDesign Wellness, most of our patients who previously relied on PPIs to manage their pain, no longer require such over-the-counter or prescription medications.

Some of the areas we test for and treat include:

- Low levels of acid production (this is especially an issue for the elderly)
- Hypothyroidism (which can often lead to heartburn and reflux symptoms)
- Stress (patients often self-report a correlation between stress and their stomach issues)
- Weak stomach lining
- Poor bile production
- Issues with the gallbladder.

The bottom line on PPIs should now be clear. Using PPIs to treat chronic heartburn, acid reflux, or GERD is questionable at best. In our view, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration should consider mandating clear warnings about the potential for fatal health risks when taking PPIs for two weeks or longer.

If you're ready to ditch your heartburn medication and address the root causes of your stomach and GI disorders, please call our office today to schedule an appointment. While here, we will discuss testing and a plan that can result in the elimination of your dependence on heartburn medication. Contact our patient care coordinator, Lori, by calling (813) 445-7770.

Disclaimer: *The information in this blog post about proton pump inhibitors is provided for general informational purposes only and may not reflect current medical thinking or practices. No information contained in this post should be construed as*

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