

At Last - The Truth About NSAIDs - Anti-Inflammatories

Common prescription painkillers linked to increased risk of heart failure.

You cannot have missed this story in the papers or on the radio and TV. I have been concerned about these drugs and their newer and supposedly safer relatives for many years. They do have side effects, often serious and sometimes fatal, yet you can buy them over the counter like sweets. There are versions for back ache, menstrual pain, tooth ache and headache, but they are all the same ibuprofen.

This new study is about the associated risks of heart failure, but the stomach problems they cause have been known for years; so why take chances when there are safe natural alternatives?

Stomach problems are quite common with the non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) like ibuprofen and in fact can be extremely severe, leading to around 11,000 hospital admissions and 2,000 deaths each year in the UK. What's more these drugs are not normally recommended for asthmatics as they may trigger attacks.

A New Safe NSAID?

Rofecoxib, a new generation of anti-arthritis drugs has been launched in Britain this week, with manufacturers claiming it's as effective as existing anti-inflammatories but safer as it has fewer side-effects. American rheumatologist Prof, Sanford Roth isn't so sure. 'Long-term users of anti-inflammatories are more likely to be elderly and they, together with anyone with a previous history of stomach ulcers, are still at risk with these new drugs,' he says. 'In America there were 2 ½ m prescriptions in the first month they were available and we now know there were 10 deaths.'

Here is a story I wrote in 1999, when I visited Carl Lewis at his home in the USA. Of course he is now a bit older than he says in the article.

I'm Fine, But My Bones Are Wrecked

At 37, Carl Lewis, one of the world's greatest athletes, has the spine of a 60-year-old.

He's 6ft. 2in, slim and still has the looks that make him one of the sexiest guys on the track in the last 20 years. He walks into The Hall of Fame at Houston University - America's shrine to its great sporting heroes - with the easy, flowing gait of a world-renowned competitor.

Yet he lowered himself into the chair carefully, with his hand supporting his back. To a trained osteopath's eye, this was a man in pain.

Nine Olympic Golds, eight World Championships, a collection of Silvers and Bronzes and years of training have obviously taken their toll.

'I'll be 38 next month, but when you're young you don't think about your health in the future; you don't think your training is going to damage your body. No-one warns you of the risks of training so intensively.

'I was a late bloomer - a lot later than most of my contemporaries - and had no idea of being an elite athlete until I was about 16. I'd already damage my knee hurling my body into the long-jump pit, but there's not much you can do to protect yourself except having plenty of soft sand.

'Every competition meant at least a hundred practice jumps - pounding down the run-up, forcing myself off the board and falling into the pit. So it's not surprising that I've had operations on both knees and the doctors tell me the bottom of my spine is what they'd expect to see in a 60-year-old.

'I wasn't trained to beat the other guy, but to challenge myself. My coach always said: "You've as much talent as everyone else and if you do it right, you'll win." For me, that was the motivation.'

But as with any self-motivator, things went too far. Over-training of young athletes is a frequent cause of joint and tendon damage - and pushy coaches and parents can coerce youngsters into competing when, occasionally, they should be allowed an afternoon in front of the telly.

Carl was lucky, however. He wasn't pushed by anyone else and has very strong views about kids who are.

'It's all too common to use a steroid shot as a quick fix for the pain just so that the athlete can compete in tomorrow's event. It's a very sad temptation which a lot of people fall into. One thing's for certain, there's no quick fix in this life - especially in sport. Anyone who offers one doesn't care about you or what's best for you in the long run. What starts as a minor injury, which could heal with rest, could mean the end of a career.'

With one damaged knee, by the time he got to college it wasn't long before the tremendous physical demands of sprinting and jumping caused problems in the other. To all outward appearances, Carl was a supremely fit and healthy young man.

There was nothing inherently wrong with his joints, but the constant and punishing jarring had simply put them under more pressure by his mid-20s than most of us experience before we retire.

The inevitable consequence of this wear and tear is osteoarthritis, which is why he was forced to compete much less often in the latter years of his career. He only kept going with the help of pain-killers. Ten years ago, when he was diagnosed as having arthritis in his spine, he was told to stop exercising completely.

'I don't like taking medicines, but I was given all sorts of different drugs for the arthritis and I was very uncomfortable doing that because of the side-effects. The worst were the constant upset stomachs and feeling lethargic all the time.

'I was getting a lot of help from my massage therapist, who I see several times a week. He works with many of the top athletes and it's thanks to him that I heard about a natural herbal anti-arthritis remedy and started to take it and the pain got less, I was much more mobile - and, best of all, there were no side-effects. The relief is now continuous, I'm working out in the gym, running six miles several times a week and swimming most days. I've been virtually vegetarian for years, eating lots of tofu, fruit, vegetables, salads and lentils and I make my own fresh juice every morning.

'I'm happy that there's more interest in natural ways of improving health. Things are really going in that direction now and I hope it continues, then maybe we'll see an end to illegal drugs and anabolic steroids in sport.'

One of the most effective of all the natural anti-inflammatory medicines is the African plant, Devil's Claw.

Available as the registered herbal medicine, [FlexiHerb](#), it is a traditional product for the relief of backache, rheumatic pain and general joint and muscle aches and pains. Suitable for over 18s, but not if you are pregnant or have problems with stomach ulcers.

For more info, go to www.flexiherb.co.uk

