

# Understanding The Risks With Arthritis Pain Medications



May is Arthritis Awareness Month, which makes this a good time to learn more about the risks associated with arthritis pain medications.

Arthritis is a leading cause of pain and disability worldwide. Arthritis pain can interfere with your daily activities and enjoyment of life.

The two main types of arthritis — osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis — damage joints in different ways. Osteoarthritis occurs when the protective cartilage that cushions the ends of your bones wears down over time. Rheumatoid arthritis is a chronic inflammatory disorder that can affect more than just your joints. In some people, the condition can damage a wide variety of body systems, including the skin, eyes, lungs, heart and blood vessels.

The most common signs and symptoms of arthritis involve the joints. Depending on the type of arthritis you have, your signs and symptoms may include pain, stiffness, swelling, redness and decreased range of motion.

Mild to moderate arthritis pain may be relieved with a combination of self-care measures and lifestyle changes. If you rely on over-the-counter pain relievers to help manage your arthritis pain, it's important to know the potential side effects, which include stomach bleeding; liver and kidney damage; and increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

Learn more about the risks with arthritis pain medications from Dr. April Chang-Miller, a Mayo Clinic rheumatologist.

Many people think that over-the-counter pain relievers must be harmless because they are available without a prescription. But repeated use of these drugs can damage your stomach, kidneys, liver or heart.

Over-the-counter drugs such as ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin IB, others) and naproxen sodium (Aleve) can cause stomach bleeding and kidney damage and may increase your risk of heart attack and stroke, even early in treatment. Acetaminophen (Tylenol, others) can damage the liver, particularly at dosages higher than recommended.

These drugs are also often ingredients in other prescription and over-the-counter drugs. It's important to read labels or talk to your pharmacist or doctor so that you don't take more than the maximum daily dosage if you're taking more than one medication.

Keep in mind that medication isn't the only treatment for arthritis pain. Mild to moderate arthritis pain may be relieved with a combination of self-care measures and lifestyle changes, such as weight loss, exercise, heat or cold therapy, and physical therapy. Many doctors recommend trying this combined approach before starting medication.

If you need medication to help manage your arthritis pain, use the lowest dose necessary for the shortest time possible. Also, discuss with your doctor which pain medication is most appropriate for your specific situation. All medications — prescription and nonprescription — have risks and potential side effects.

**By April Chang-Miller, M.D., Mayo Clinic**