

NONSTEROIDAL ANTI-INFLAMMATORY DRUGS (NSAIDs)

What Are Nonsteroidal Anti-Inflammatory Drugs (NSAIDs)?

Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, or NSAIDs (pronounced EN-seds), are a large group of medications used to treat pain and inflammation.

NSAIDs used in full doses on a regular basis help block the actions of body chemicals that contribute to the pain and inflammation associated with many forms of arthritis.

There are many types of NSAIDs. Aspirin is the oldest of all the NSAIDs, and many people find it to be quite effective. Other examples of NSAIDs are ibuprofen and naproxen. In addition, a new class of NSAIDs called COX-2 inhibitors has recently been approved, and they may be easier on the stomach and intestines than other medications. NSAIDs come in the form of pills, suppositories, liquids or injections.

Which NSAID Is Best for You?

Each NSAID is similar in action and side effects. Some NSAIDs work better than others for different kinds of arthritis and related conditions and for different people.

You and your doctor will decide which drug and dosage are best for you depending on several factors. Your overall health and age need to be considered as well as the frequency with which you must take the medication and how you respond to it. If you're taking other medications while you're taking NSAIDs, this, too, can be a deciding factor, as well as cost of the drug.

NSAIDs that are available over the counter were approved for use in lower doses than those available by prescription. Do not take more than the amount indicated on the bottle without first checking with your doctor. These products are intended to be taken on an as-needed basis for minor aches, pains and headaches, but not on a regular, ongoing basis and not in amounts equal to prescription doses.

Aspirin: The Original NSAID

Aspirin, also known as acetylsalicylic (a-SEE-til-sal-i-SIL-ik) acid or ASA, belongs to a family of drugs called salicylates (sa-LIS-i-lates). The term salicylate refers to the active ingredient in the drug.

Small amounts of aspirin and other salicylates can help relieve headaches, mild pain and fever. Larger amounts taken regularly over a period of time relieve some of the pain, heat, redness and swelling associated with the inflammation of many forms of arthritis and related conditions. Careful monitoring by your doctor and pharmacist will help ensure that you get the maximum benefit and fewest side effects from your medication.

Aspirin Substitutes

Acetaminophen is used to relieve headaches, fever and mild pain. Although it does not reduce the inflammation or swelling that can sometimes be associated with osteoarthritis or other arthritis-related conditions, this aspirin substitute is a helpful treatment when pain relief is the main concern. Many doctors now consider acetaminophen to be the preferred initial treatment for the pain of osteoarthritis.

In addition, aspirin may be combined with acetaminophen in a single tablet for relief of arthritis and other painful conditions.

COX-2 Inhibitors

COX-2 inhibitors are a relatively new subcategory of NSAIDs that may be safer for the stomach than its predecessors.

What Are the Side Effects of NSAIDs?

Side effects are more likely to occur if you're taking large doses of NSAIDs or if you take them over a long period of time. Some side effects are mild and may go away without treatment. Others are more serious and should be treated right away.

Most people are able to use NSAIDs for their arthritis with little or no problem. However, you should be aware of problems that could occur. Only some side effects are listed here. Most NSAIDs have similar side effects, but ask your doctor or pharmacist about specific side effects of the NSAID you're taking.

Stomach and Ulcer Problems

Sometimes NSAIDs cause problems such as stomach pain, heartburn, gas, bloating, constipation, diarrhea, nausea and vomiting. Check with your doctor if these problems continue to bother you after one week. Do not wait this long if problems are severe.

NSAIDs can cause stomach irritation in some people, which can lead to more serious problems, such as ulcers or gastrointestinal bleeding. An ulcer is an open sore on the stomach lining that may bleed. It can be serious and even fatal. Ask your doctor about warning signs.

Fluid Retention and Decreased Kidney Function

NSAIDs sometimes affect the normal function of the kidneys, or can cause fluid to accumulate in the body. If you have liver or kidney disease, high blood pressure or congestive heart failure, get your doctor's advice before taking NSAIDs. Stop taking the drug immediately and contact your doctor if you experience sudden weight gain; swollen ankles, feet or lower legs; shortness of breath; or increased fatigue.

Problems with Balance, Hearing, Drowsiness and Headache

Dizziness, lightheadedness, drowsiness or mild headache may occur when you begin taking NSAIDs. These problems may disappear after your body adjusts to the medicine, but check with your doctor if they continue beyond a week or two.

Easy Bleeding

Some NSAIDs interfere with the clotting of blood. Some people who take NSAIDs may bruise easily. If you have any bleeding problems or take blood thinners, check with your doctor before taking NSAIDs.

Other Problems

Other problems, such as allergic reactions, high blood pressure or liver disease may occur with NSAIDs. While these problems are rare, you should be aware of them and take precautions. Do not take two different types of NSAIDs at the same time, because their effects compound each other.

As noted above, NSAIDs can cause liver and/or kidney damage. While this is rare, it can happen and, initially these effects may not cause any symptoms. You should discuss this with your physician who may deem it necessary to check and to monitor certain blood tests.

Controlling high blood pressure can be a problem for some people taking NSAIDs. NSAIDs can interfere with the effects of some common medications used to lower blood pressure. If you're taking NSAIDs and also have high blood pressure, be sure to alert your doctor to this fact so appropriate medications can be prescribed.