

Arthritis Medications Have Come a Long Way

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Unlike the common cold, a pill and a teaspoon of syrup won't wash away the pain of chronic arthritis. Arthritis pain, however, can be managed which is best done with a regimen of exercise, positive living and medication. Luckily, for the millions of arthritis sufferers, treatments and medications have come a long way since the days of aspirin and a heating pad. Today, there are hundreds of medications at the patient's disposal – medications designed to relieve pain, reduce inflammation and slow or stop joint damage – restoring the patient to nearly complete functionality.

To relieve mild pain, most health care providers recommend that you first try over-the-counter medications like aspirin, acetaminophen, and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen and naproxen sodium products. However, for the many arthritis sufferers whose pain is considered anything but mild, over-the-counter medications are not enough.

Prescription arthritis medications, however, have come under scrutiny in recent months following the discovery that some medications cause a heightened risk for cardiovascular disease, namely the class of medications known as COX-2 Inhibitors, another type of NSAID. These medications include drugs, such as Vioxx and Celebrex®, which have gained popularity in recent years partly due to the fact that they cause fewer stomach problems than traditional pain relievers.

In February, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) voted to keep Vioxx and Celebrex on the market to ensure continued availability for the people who really need them. This decision was made just five months after Vioxx was pulled from the shelf following a study that showed increased heart risk in people taking the drug for 18 months.

Although the FDA has approved continued sale of these drugs, it has done so with several caveats in mind, particularly heightened restrictions and warnings on the drugs, and limitations on marketing.

The COX-2 Inhibitors, however, aren't the only way to go. Other classes of prescription medications commonly used to treat arthritis include Disease-Modifying Anti-Rheumatic Drugs (DMARDs), which – because they take weeks or months to work – are often referred to as "slowacting, anti-rheumatic drugs." Although slow acting, research has shown that DMARDs are effective; and for some, these drugs can even stop disease progression and joint damage.

Corticosteroids (steroids) are strong drugs that quickly reduce swelling and inflammation and are prescribed in widely varying doses depending on the type and severity of the condition. They carry potential side effects, particularly at larger doses. To maximize benefits, but minimize potential side effects, they are usually prescribed in low doses or for short durations. Steroids should be taken as prescribed and should never be stopped without talking to a doctor first.

As with any medical regimen, work closely with your doctor to ensure the course of action that will work safely and effectively for you.

CLASSES Call 760-773-4535 for information and reservations. Sports and Your Arthritis A Help or A Hindrance? F, May 6, 1:30 to 3 p.m. Sohail Ahmad, MD, Orthopedic Surgeon Advanced Exercise (Year Round) TU TH, 2:30 to 3:30 p.m. Cost is \$3 per class.