

The Scoop on PPIs



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PPIs (Proton Pump Inhibitors) are medications that profoundly inhibit stomach acid secretion and are therefore appropriate treatment for conditions caused by harmful acid exposure. Such conditions are gastroesophageal reflux (GERD), ulcer and gastritis. Many people take these medicines (common brands are Prilosec, Nexium, Protonix, Prevacid, Zegerid, Aciphex and others) daily, some for years. Whereas the safety of such a widely prescribed group of drugs should be recognized, recent studies have raised concerns.

First, a word about medication side effects; every medication may cause side effects, usually unwanted and sometimes dangerous. Side effects may be unpredictable, such as an allergy, abdominal pain, and headache or liver problems; or may be predictable, based on the physiologic changes caused by the medicine. All PPIs are of similar potency and duration of action; predictable side effects are therefore similar. A discussion of such predictable side effects is easiest if based in a discussion of gastric secretion.

Acid is released into the stomach constantly, but increases with certain stimuli, especially a meal. The healthy stomach is always acidic,

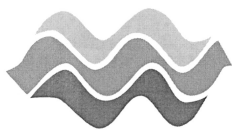
presenting a barrier to infections. Therefore, certain intestinal infections (and also pneumonias) are slightly more common in PPI users. An acidic environment alters the chemistry of iron, calcium and some other nutrients, making absorption more efficient. Rare instances of iron depletion are reported and osteoporosis-related hip fractures were recently reported among PPI users in Great Britain. It is prudent for daily, long term PPI users to add a source of calcium, such as Tums or Rolaids, to their regimen. Vitamin B12 absorption may also be compromised by PPI use, so a yearly measurement of B12 level in the blood may be useful.

Finally, what about cancer? Prilosec caused stomach cancer in laboratory rats, raising grave concerns that such tumors would occur in humans. Fortunately, no case has occurred. Some doctors have worried that colon cancer might be promoted by chronic PPI use, but increased numbers of cases have not been reported. Therefore, these medications are very safe, but like all medications, should be used only as indicated and in conjunction with an appropriate diet and lifestyle.

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