Analgesic Drug Use May Cut Risk of Ovarian Cancer

By Anthony J. Brown, MD

NEW YORK JAN 16, 2006 (Reuters Health) - Regular use of NSAIDs and, to a lesser extent, acetaminophen, is associated with a reduced risk of ovarian cancer, according to the results of a recent population-based, case-control study. Still, researchers say they are a long way from recommending these drugs solely for a possible ovarian cancer preventive effect.

In the study, women who described any NSAID use in the preceding 5 years were 28% less likely to develop ovarian cancer than were nonusers. The risk reduction was strongest with aspirin - 37%.

"Previous studies looking at this topic have yielded inconsistent results," lead author Dr. Joellen M. Schildkraut, from Duke University Medical Center in Durham, North Carolina, told Reuters Health. "In a recent meta-analysis, researchers found no anti-ovarian cancer effect for these drugs. However, I'm not sure that all of the data" included in the study was really suitable for combined analysis, he said.

The present study, reported in the January issue of Epidemiology, involved 586 women with ovarian cancer and 627 controls who were surveyed about analgesic drug use during the preceding 5 years. Women who regularly used analgesics for at least 3 months were classified as "users", while all other women were considered nonusers.

As noted, NSAID users were 28% less likely to develop ovarian cancer than nonusers. The risk reduction with acetaminophen use was slightly less - 22%.

As to how NSAIDs might cut the risk of ovarian cancer, Dr. Schildkraut said that it probably "involves antiinflammatory effects." For acetaminophen, the mechanism is less clear, but may also involve antiinflammatory effects, albeit to a much lesser extent than with the NSAIDs, she added. The fact that another study also showed a benefit with acetaminophen use "suggests it is a real finding."

Dr. Schildkraut said that while the present findings support an inverse association between analgesic use and ovarian cancer risk, this study by no means closes the book on the topic. Further research from epidemiologic studies and clinical trials is needed to confirm the link and to clarify various issues, such as the optimal agent as well as the appropriate dose and duration of use needed to see a benefit, she added.

SOURCE:

- Epidemiology 2006;17:104-107.

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Anti-inflammatories and Breast Cancer

Inflammation is one of the pieces of the breast cancer puzzle, and that may be why other research is showing that nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen and aspirin, may help prevent breast cancer. This information came out of the Women's Health Initiative (WHI), a large, ongoing, government-sponsored study of women's health in the U.S. (The WHI is best known for the revelation a few years ago that conventional HRT increases the risk of breast cancer, stroke, heart disease and gallbladder disease.)The NSAIDs arm of the WHI study compared nearly 80,000 women who didn't have breast cancer, to 1,392 who did, and looked at how often they took NSAIDs. They found that women who took 2 or more tablets per week of over-the-counter anti-inflammatory drugs at standard doses for 5 to 9 years, had 21 percent less risk of breast cancer. Protection went up to as much as 28 percent for women who had used NSAIDs for more than 10 years, and who had used ibuprofen instead of aspirin. Low dose aspirin and the pain reliever acetaminophen (e.g. Tylenol) did not protect against breast cancer, which makes sense because acetaminophen is a pain killer but not an anti-inflammatory.