

IT'S ABOUT PAIN

IS TYLENOL THE ANSWER FOR PAIN? HOW ABOUT IBUPROFEN?

In the old days, Tylenol was for fever and ibuprofen was for arthritis. They replaced aspirin, which supposedly caused overdoses and ulcers. We now know that it takes a handful to overdose on aspirin. And ulcers are caused by germs.

Nowadays, with all the bad press re: opioids for chronic pain, many folks, including some pharmacists and doctors, say “just take Tylenol (or ibuprofen).....opioids can kill you.”

Opioids work on receptors in the brain, essentially blocking or diminishing awareness of pain. Ibuprofen likely works at the site of an inflamed/injured tissue. Tylenol’s effect on such sites is minimal. It probably inhibits brain chemicals via a poorly understood mechanism.

Both Tylenol and ibuprofen, unlike opioids, have a ceiling effect— no benefit from escalating the dose.

Now to be fair, let’s admit that in some people, pain (especially if acute) can be satisfactorily suppressed by Tylenol or ibuprofen. But not so much in those with chronic pain. Efforts to “lace” opioids (oxycodone, hydrocodone, codeine) with Tylenol or ibuprofen have yielded minimal improvements. However, trying to overdose with a handful, is impossible because high doses of Tylenol or ibuprofen cause vomiting.

What can go wrong, Part 1: Tylenol

Tylenol, one of many brands of acetaminophen, is found in more than 600 over-the-counter medications. Doses above 4000mg/day can cause severe liver failure, but some authorities set the safe limit at 2000 mg/d. Liver failure is a difficult issue, whether from Tylenol, hepatitis, alcohol or metabolic disorders. As an aside, we can now check for early impairment with our new FibroScan test for the presence of fat or scarring. It’s painless and covered by insurance and Medicare. Tylenol doses are: Regular, 325mg; Arthritis, 500mg; Extra Strength 635mg. Most combinations with opioids use 325mg, but with Vicodin it’s 500mg. So do the math. 2000mg isn’t a lot of pills.

What can go wrong, part 2: Ibuprofen

Over-the-counter ibuprofen contains 200mg/pill. Suggested dose is 1-2 four times daily (1600mg). The maximum prescription dose is 3200mg/d. Not many unsuspecting folks would take 16 pills a day, and overdose. But consequences can occur at much lower doses: heart attacks and kidney failure. The heart risk led to banishment of VIOXX, an extremely effective non-opioid pain reliever. Kidney failure ended the career of Seattle Seahawks’ all pro safety Kenny Easley. Ibuprofen can also contribute to stomach and intestinal bleeding.

So as much as we would like to substitute Tylenol and ibuprofen for opioids in the treatment of chronic pain, their benefits are just too limited and the hazards too serious, to be successful alternatives.