

Protecting Your Stomach While Taking NSAIDs or Antiplatelets

Who is this leaflet for?

This leaflet is for patients:

- Aged over 65 who are taking long term NSAIDs (such as ibuprofen or naproxen) for pain relief.
- Aged over 75 who are taking low-dose aspirin or clopidogrel to reduce the risk of blood clots.

Why am I receiving this leaflet?

These medications, while necessary, can increase the risk of gastrointestinal (GI) problems, such as stomach ulcers and bleeding. This leaflet provides important information on how to protect your stomach while on these treatments.

How can NSAIDs and antiplatelet medicines affect my stomach?

- **NSAIDs** can irritate the stomach lining, increasing the risk of ulcers or bleeding, particularly with long-term use.
- **Aspirin and clopidogrel** can increase the risk of stomach bleeding, especially if used for a long period or in combination with other medicines.

How can I protect my stomach?

To reduce your risk of GI side effects, your doctor may prescribe a **proton pump inhibitor (PPI)**, such as lansoprazole or omeprazole, which helps reduce stomach acid and protects your stomach lining.

- **Lansoprazole (15 mg once daily)** is often prescribed and should be taken at least 30 minutes before food for the best effect.
- **Omeprazole (20 mg once daily)** is another option, but if you are taking clopidogrel, a different medicine may be recommended to avoid possible interactions.

Important advice while using PPIs:

- Only take the PPI while you are on NSAIDs or antiplatelet medicines.
- Your medication should be reviewed by your doctor at least **once a year** if you are on long-term treatment.
- If you are older or have other health conditions (such as bone problems or kidney disease), you may need additional monitoring.

What are the potential side effects of Proton Pump Inhibitors (PPIs)?

While PPIs are effective at protecting your stomach, they can have side effects, especially when taken for a long time. Here's what you need to know and how you can reduce your risk:

1. Increased Risk of Infections

Taking PPIs may increase your risk of certain infections, particularly:

- **Clostridioides difficile infection (C. difficile):** This is a type of bacterial infection that affects the bowel, causing diarrhoea, which can be severe.

How to reduce your risk:

- **Hygiene:** Wash your hands thoroughly after using the toilet and before eating to lower your risk of infections.
- **Antibiotics:** Avoid unnecessary use of antibiotics, as these can increase your risk of infections like *C. difficile*.
- **Review your PPI use:** If you are at high risk for infections, your doctor may regularly review whether you still need a PPI.

2. Bone Fractures

Long-term use of PPIs, particularly at high doses, may be linked to a slightly increased risk of fractures, particularly in the hip, wrist, or spine. This is more common in people over 50 and in postmenopausal women who may already be at risk for osteoporosis.

How to reduce your risk:

- **Take calcium and vitamin D:** These nutrients are essential for bone health. Your doctor may advise you to take supplements, especially if you are at risk of fractures.
- **Stop smoking and reduce alcohol intake:** Smoking and drinking too much alcohol can weaken bones. Quitting smoking and limiting alcohol consumption can help protect your bones.
- **Weight-bearing exercises:** Regular exercise, like walking or weight-bearing exercises, can strengthen bones and reduce your fracture risk.

3. Low Magnesium Levels (Hypomagnesaemia)

PPIs, especially when used for over a year, can sometimes cause low magnesium levels in the blood. Symptoms of low magnesium include fatigue, dizziness, muscle cramps, and irregular heartbeats. This risk is higher if you are also taking medicines like diuretics (water tablets) or digoxin.

How to reduce your risk:

- **Regular check-ups:** Your doctor may monitor your magnesium levels if you are on long-term PPI therapy, particularly if you are also taking other medicines that lower magnesium.
- **Recognise symptoms early:** If you experience unexplained fatigue, muscle cramps, or dizziness, inform your doctor right away so they can check your magnesium levels.

4. Pneumonia

There is some evidence that starting PPIs may slightly increase the risk of **community-acquired pneumonia**, although this appears to be more likely when you first start taking the medication.

How to reduce your risk:

- **Stop smoking:** Smoking can damage your lungs, increasing your risk of pneumonia. Quitting smoking can help lower this risk.
- **Good hand hygiene:** Washing your hands regularly helps prevent the spread of respiratory infections.
- **Vaccination:** Consider getting a flu and pneumonia vaccine, especially if you are older or have a lung condition.

5. Rebound Acid Hypersecretion

When you stop taking a PPI, you may experience a temporary increase in stomach acid production, which can cause symptoms like heartburn. This is known as **rebound acid hypersecretion** and might make it seem like your condition has worsened.

How to reduce your risk:

- **Gradually reduce your dose:** If your doctor decides it is safe to stop your PPI, they may suggest slowly reducing your dose rather than stopping suddenly. This can help prevent a flare-up of symptoms.
- **Lifestyle changes:** Eating smaller, more frequent meals, avoiding trigger foods (such as spicy or fatty foods), and not lying down immediately after eating can help reduce acid production naturally.

6. Kidney Problems (Tubulo-Interstitial Nephritis)

In rare cases, PPIs have been linked to a kidney condition called **tubulo-interstitial nephritis**. This is an inflammation of the kidneys, which may cause symptoms like changes in urination, swelling, and fatigue. Early diagnosis is important to prevent long-term damage.

How to reduce your risk:

- **Regular monitoring:** If you are on long-term PPI treatment, your doctor may perform regular kidney function tests to ensure your kidneys are working properly.
- **Report unusual symptoms:** If you notice any changes in how often you urinate or if you experience swelling in your legs or face, contact your doctor immediately.

7. Skin Reactions (Subacute Cutaneous Lupus Erythematosus)

In very rare cases, PPIs can cause a skin condition called **subacute cutaneous lupus erythematosus** (SCLE). This condition can cause red, scaly rashes, particularly in areas exposed to the sun.

How to reduce your risk:

- **Sun protection:** Protect your skin by wearing sunblock and avoiding excessive sun exposure.
- **Seek medical advice:** If you develop a rash, stop taking the PPI and inform your doctor right away. The condition usually improves once the medication is stopped.

How to reduce your overall risk while on PPIs:

- **Regular medication reviews:** Make sure your doctor regularly reviews your need for PPIs. You should be on the lowest effective dose for the shortest time necessary.
- **Balanced diet:** Ensure you are getting enough calcium, vitamin D, and magnesium through your diet, particularly if you are on long-term PPI therapy.
- **Healthy lifestyle:** Quitting smoking, limiting alcohol, and maintaining a healthy weight can all help lower your risk of complications while on PPIs.

If you have any concerns or notice any unusual symptoms while taking PPIs, contact your healthcare provider for advice.

General recommendations:

- **Take the lowest effective dose** of NSAIDs or antiplatelet medicines for the shortest time possible.
- If you smoke or drink heavily, speak with your doctor, as these habits can increase the risk of stomach problems.
- Make sure you get enough calcium and vitamin D to protect your bones if you are on long-term PPIs.

When to seek help?

Contact your doctor immediately if you notice:

- Black or bloody stools (which may indicate stomach bleeding).
- Severe or persistent stomach pain.
- Any unusual side effects from your medicines.

For further information, talk to your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.