

Broken hips linked to heartburn drugs

By Thomas H. Maugh II

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Older people who take heartburn drugs such as Nexium, Prilosec, Prevacid and Protonix for long periods have a significantly increased risk of hip fractures, possibly because the drugs block calcium absorption, Pennsylvania researchers reported Wednesday.

The drugs, which block production of stomach acid, are among the most widely used in the U.S., with combined annual sales of more than \$10 billion.

"The perception is that the drugs are completely safe, and doctors dispense them without thinking too much about the risks and the benefits," said Dr. Yu-Xiao Yang of the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, who led the study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Now, he said, physicians should be aware and prescribe the lowest possible dose.

An estimated 300,000 Americans over age 65 suffer hip fractures each year, according to the National Institutes of Health.

The findings are interesting, said Dr. Alan Buchman of Northwestern University, but the results do not prove that the

drugs caused the increased risk.

"Maybe they have some other problem that increases the risk for fractures," he said.

Even if the drugs are at fault, the solution may be simply to consume more calcium, said Buchman, who was not involved in the study.

Amy Allen, a spokeswoman for TAP Pharmaceuticals Inc. of Lake Forest, which manufactures Prevacid, said the company's postmarketing surveillance "has not identified a safety signal for bone fractures related to Prevacid."

Yang and his colleagues used a large British database to identify 13,566 hip-fracture patients over the age of 50 and a matched group of 135,386 healthy people.

They found that one year of using the drugs increased risk of hip fractures by 44 percent.

Patients taking a different class of acid inhibitors that includes Tagamet, Zantac, Pepcid and Axid had a 21 percent higher fracture risk after one year.

The study was funded by the National Institutes of Health and the American Gastroenterological Association/Glaxo-SmithKline Institute for Digestive Health.

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