

Bottom Line's Daily Health News®

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Much Easier Medicating

Recently, I wrote here about using topical treatments instead of pills for pain relief. In many cases, for example, topical pain relievers are a good alternative to NSAIDs (nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs), such as *ibuprofen* (Advil or Motrin) or *naproxen* (Aleve or Naprosyn), which the FDA warns can damage the stomach lining and raise the risk for heart attack and stroke. The reason? Absorbing medication through the skin is usually associated with fewer side effects than absorbing it through the gut.

Because many people have a hard time swallowing pills, I wanted to know what other types of drugs can be taken transdermally, or through the skin. Is it possible to obtain medications other than painkillers in topical rather than oral form?

The Chemical Considerations

According to William Elliott, MD, PhD, professor of preventive medicine at Rush Medical College of Rush University in Chicago, there are a number of other valuable topical medications, and these do offer certain advantages over their oral alternatives. However, he cautions that topical medicines still are the exception rather than the norm and are likely to remain so because most medicines just don't work this way.

It all comes down to chemistry. As Dr. Elliott explained, medicines that are absorbed through the skin ideally should be chemically neutral. However, many medicines are made up of ions -- atoms that carry a net positive or negative electrical charge due to the loss or gain of an electron. These charged particles generally do not flow as well

through membranes in the skin as do neutral substances. As a result, they are more likely to be effective in oral rather than topical form.

A Round-Up of Topical Medications

What medications are available topically? Dr. Elliott mentioned several that he considers especially beneficial...

- **Clonidine patches.** Both clonidine tablets and patches are available to treat high blood pressure. They work by decreasing the heart rate and relaxing blood vessels so blood can flow more easily through the body. Yet clonidine is associated with a number of troublesome side effects, including dry mouth, drowsiness, dizziness, constipation, tiredness and headache. This is particularly true with the tablets, explains Dr. Elliott. In patch form, the medicine is absorbed more slowly and does not pass through the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, so there is a reduction in the frequency and severity of side effects.
- **Birth control patches.** Hormones in birth control patches can be delivered topically as well as orally. Wearing a patch is more convenient than remembering to take a pill, and it also allows a lower dose of hormone to be used.
- **Nicotine patches.** Quitting cigarettes is hard to do, so whatever help you can get -- take it. According to Dr. Elliott, the nicotine patch can be a very helpful tool to help you kick the habit. The patch delivers medicine at a slower pace than nicotine gum, so again there are fewer side effects. And when it comes to nicotine, a powerful stimulant, the side effects can be dramatic indeed, including anxiety, nervousness and a rapid heartbeat. You may feel as if you're jumping out of your skin, warns Dr. Elliott. A controlled and steady delivery of nicotine through the skin can help you deal with cravings while minimizing uncomfortable side effects more often associated with the gum.

When Topical Medications Are Not Commercially Available

Clearly, not all drugs are readily available in topical form. In my article about topical painkillers, I mentioned that ibuprofen was not commercially available as a cream or lotion, but that it could be specially made up for you in this fashion -- for example, if you are having stomach problems with NSAIDs or are already at risk for heart attack and don't want to add any additional risk. Dr. Elliott told me that in order to do this successfully, ibuprofen would first have to be rendered chemically neutral.

This is where compounding pharmacies can play a real service, says Dr. Elliott. If your doctor agrees that you may be better off with a topical medication than a pill, and if the chemistry of the drug in question lends itself to topical application, you can get your medication custom-compounded in this form at a compounding pharmacy. (see *Daily Health News*, [July 15, 2004](#).)

Over-the-counter (OTC) preparations produced by compounding pharmacies are not subject to the same rigorous regulations about strength, consistency and label accuracy that FDA-regulated suppliers must endure. Consult your doctor about choosing a compounding pharmacy. Chances are, if a physician prescribes a compounded drug for you, he/she also will tell you where to get it.

There also are many natural pharmaceuticals that are prescribed in transdermal form.

Each of Us is Unique

Now -- topical medications, while beneficial, are not uniformly preferable to oral ones. Sometimes you want the heavier dosage levels often more easily provided by oral drugs... other times you don't need them. In the long run, the best thing you can do is work with your doctor to determine the best medicine -- in the most appropriate form and at the lowest possible effective dose -- that meets your unique medical needs. It's always worth checking with your doctor about whether an alternate form of a medication can be taken in lower doses. Although pills will be more convenient for the doctor to prescribe, they may not always be the best for you.

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Right on

After all the talk about the obesity epidemic in the US and the associated health concerns and costs of excess weight, the recent study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) concerning weight and mortality rates took a lot of people by surprise. The study, based on data analysis, found that people who are "somewhat" overweight had the same decreased risk for death as did people of normal weight. And there was yet another surprise: Being underweight *increases* risk for death.

To determine categories of weight, the study used the BMI (body mass index), a height-to-weight ratio. Normal weight BMI is from 18.5 to 25, and overweight BMI is from 25 to 30. Obese is anything over 30, and the study did confirm that being obese increases risk for death. (For more on BMI, see *Daily Health News*, [December 16, 2003](#).)

Given that these findings seem to contradict previous studies, it raises the question again, "What is an optimal weight?" I discussed this with Jonny Bowden, nutrition and fitness specialist and author of [Living the Low Carb Life: From Atkins to the Zone](#) [Choosing the Diet that's Right for You](#) (Sterling).

Exceptions to Their Rules

His first observation is that BMI is not completely reliable because it doesn't take into account the ratio of fat to muscle, and muscle weighs more than fat. In BMI terms, Arnold Schwarzenegger at his bodybuilding peak would have been categorized as obese! The study, based on three surveys over 30 years of national weight/height data, may be putting even well-conditioned non-bodybuilders into the overweight group and could have skewed the results somewhat, says Bowden.

The study also did not consider the association of excess weight to chronic diseases, including diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease. Innumerable studies have established that they are definitely linked. So while fatalities may not be significantly different, quality of life and health-care costs are significantly at odds.

Where's the Bull's-eye?

As for being slightly overweight -- say 10 or so pounds over normal weight -- obesity researcher Kathleen Keller, PhD, at Columbia University's New York Obesity Research Center says that a small amount of excess weight is not a health issue.

In our weight-obsessed culture, what's the optimal weight? Because we don't have anything better, BMI is a reasonable way to *approximate* normal weight. Some risk factors are linked to certain waist measurements -- over 35 inches for women and 40 for men. (You can calculate your BMI at <http://nhlbisupport.com/bmi/>.) Bowden suggests that once you have calculated your BMI, adjust for your muscle mass and

skeletal frame. Keep your weight low enough to be protective against disease (not more than 10 or so pounds above normal) but not too much below normal weight either. Simply consider how you feel at a particular weight, says Bowden. Even a few pounds can make a big difference in your energy and vitality.

Finally, bear in mind that this is just one study with many unanswered questions. Besides all the concerns mentioned above, the study doesn't talk about overall fitness levels and cardiovascular health. Whatever you do, don't view the results of this study as permission to be obese. No matter how you slice it, being significantly overweight is hazardous to your health.

Be well,



Carole Jackson
Bottom Line's *Daily Health News*

SPECIAL OFFER

2-Week Heart and Artery Makeover -- No Drugs or Surgery

A California physician is revolutionizing the way heart problems are treated.


Without dangerous drugs or painful surgery, he's rejuvenating the hearts of even seriously ill patients -- scrubbing blocked arteries clean and sending cholesterol and blood pressure readings into a nosedive.

Best of all, if you follow his advice, you can eat all you want. You won't need painful surgery. And you won't endure a life of increasing dependence on dangerous heart drugs.


[Read on...](#)

Sources:

Much Easier Medicating

 William Elliott, MD, PhD, professor of preventive medicine, Rush Medical College of Rush University, Chicago.

Right on

 Jonny Bowden, nutrition specialist and speaker, author, [*Living the Low Carb Life: From Atkins to the Zone Choosing the Diet that's Right for You*](#) (Sterling).

 Kathleen Keller, PhD, researcher, New York Obesity Research Center, Columbia University, New York City.

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