

June 30, 2005

# Bottom Line's Daily Health News

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## TOP THIS

I've talked a lot in recent months about options for muscle pain relief -- substitutes for nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and other pain pills... supplements that can help ease joint pain... and even exercise and massage regimens. What about topical creams and lotions?

### TOPICAL ADVANTAGES

To learn about topical pain relief options, I spoke with Norman J. Marcus, MD, founder of the Norman Marcus Pain Institute in New York City, past president of the American Academy of Pain Medicine and author of [Freedom from Pain](#) (Fireside). He told me that topical treatments offer significant pain relief with few of the side effects of oral medications, thanks to the fact that topical treatments generally are not absorbed into the bloodstream at the level that ingestibles are.

Specifically, topical medications...

- Are not absorbed through the gut, and so avoid stomach bleeding from aspirin, for example.
- Are absorbed through the skin, so less medication enters into the bloodstream. This means lower cardiovascular risk and less chance of painkiller addiction.
- Have fewer possible drug interactions due to less medicine in the bloodstream. This is especially advantageous to older people, who are more prone to side effects, often have a variety of medical conditions and take multiple medications (which can lead to multiple

- drug interactions). Older people don't clear medicines from the bloodstream as quickly and efficiently, which can gradually cause a dangerous accumulation of drugs in the body.
- Relief comes faster than with a pill. Topical medications directly affect pain receptors in the skin and can offer virtually immediate relief for what moments earlier seemed to be intractable pain.

Topical painkillers and other medications come in a variety of forms, including cream, lotion, ointment, gel, spray and solution. They vary in strength, with the more potent ones available by prescription only. Dr. Marcus outlined a number of topical options, from local anesthetics to specially compounded products.

### LOCAL ANESTHETICS

This is a good place to start with topical medicines. Milder alternatives for minor pain and injuries are available over-the-counter (OTC), while stronger remedies require a prescription from your physician.

- **OTC anesthetics.** These are used to relieve pain and itching caused by minor cuts and scratches, sunburn and other minor burns, insect bites or stings and poison ivy, oak or sumac. Examples include Solarcaine and Dermoplast (benzocaine preparations).
- **Lidocaine.** *Lidocaine* (Lidoderm) is prescribed for the relief of pain caused by nerve damage, such as diabetic neuropathy and shingles. It works by blocking the signals at the nerve endings in the skin.

### CAPSAICIN, EUCALYPTUS AND MORE

Other OTC options include capsaicin made from the oil extract of cayenne peppers, and eucalyptus oil from the bark of the tree of the same name. Capsaicin works by depleting the nerves of a pain-inducing chemical called *substance P*. It is recommended for arthritic pain and nerve pain due to diabetes or shingles. Although capsaicin offers pain relief that accumulates with regular use, many people cannot tolerate the initial intense burning sensation upon application.

Natural substances such as eucalyptus, wintergreen and menthol produce intense hot or cold sensations that temporarily offset pain. They are found in conventional OTC products such as Ben-Gay and Icy Hot, and in many natural preparations at your local health-food store. These are often combined with the capsaicin in "icy/hot" preparations. Some people find it difficult to tolerate their strong scent.

### CORTICOSTEROIDS

These drugs work by reducing inflammation. By staunching the release of inflammatory substances from skin cells, they decrease swelling, discomfort, itching and redness. Corticosteroids are used to treat eczema, dermatitis, insect bites and stings and poison ivy, oak and sumac. Most require a prescription, although a few -- a low-dose preparation of hydrocortisone such

as Cortaid, for example -- are available OTC.

Other corticosteroids available in cream or ointment form include *aclometasone* (Aclovate), *clocortolone* (Cloderm) and *desonide* (DesOwen). Topical corticosteroids must be used for limited periods only, since they increase skin sensitivity and chronic use can cause thinning of the skin. Additionally, corticosteroids *are* passed into circulation and thus do have potentially dangerous systemic effects over time.

### NONSTEROIDAL ANTI-INFLAMMATORY DRUGS (NSAIDS)

Topical NSAID creams and gels are an excellent option for those who are worried about the growing number of side effects and safety concerns being chalked up to NSAID pills. OTC products such as Aspercreme and Sportscreme provide pain relief and reduce inflammation of arthritic joints. You also can get ibuprofen cream from a compounding pharmacy. (More about compounding pharmacies below.)

According to the *Archives of Internal Medicine* (October 11, 2004), a new prescription topical NSAID under review by the FDA shows promise. In one study, topical Pennsaid (*diclofenac* 1.5%) was significantly more effective than a placebo in reducing pain, increasing physical functioning and improving overall well being in people with osteoarthritis in the knee. The most common side effect was minor skin irritation, which occurred in 68 out of 164 patients. Pennsaid is already approved for use in Canada and Europe.

### COMPOUNDED PRODUCTS

Don't be limited by what you can buy off the shelf, advises Dr. Marcus. If you find that standard remedies don't work for you, ask your physician about getting a custom-made medication from a compounding pharmacy. One pain reliever that Dr. Marcus has compounded for his patients is *ketamine*, which he finds elicits a great response topically. (Read more about compounding pharmacies in *Daily Health News*, [July 15, 2004](#).)

Ketamine is an NMDA (N-methyl-D-aspartate, a nerve receptor) antagonist, which blunts the transmission of pain signals along one of the nerve pathways. It was originally developed as a surgical anesthetic and is used in conjunction with other anesthetics. Taken orally, these drugs have side effects similar to opioids, including sedation, dizziness, nausea, constipation and dry mouth, as well as hallucinations and psychotic episodes. However, spare amounts applied topically relieve pain while virtually eliminating the risk of these effects.

Dr. Marcus notes that muscular pain is very common, but highly underestimated and highly underdiagnosed. The topical application of ketamine provides virtually instant relief of muscular pain. *Caution:* Prolonged application may result in delusion or hallucinations -- so apply with extreme discretion.

Topical pain relievers are something to consider given the FDA's recent

announcement that all NSAIDs -- even OTC ones -- carry stomach, cardiovascular and skin risks. And, because topicals place less burden on your system, they are an option to consider in general for pain. Of course, Dr. Marcus is quick to point out that the answer doesn't always lie in a drug. Measures such as stretching and flexing the muscles and controlling stress levels are often just as important in stimulating the body's own healing mechanisms.

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**SPECIAL OFFER**

## **ONE-HALF CUP OF THIS MIRACULOUS "MEDICINE FOOD" CUTS YOUR CHOLESTEROL BY 10%!**

Wouldn't it be great if you could lower your cholesterol by 10% just by eating one-half cup of this popular food each day? That's a quick 25-point drop if your count is 250 -- with NO drugs or drug side effects.

What's more, a 2001 study published in *Archives of Internal Medicine* demonstrated how this same food also can lower your risk for heart disease by 22%, PLUS help lower your blood pressure. It even can help block diabetes! What a winner!

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## **CAUTION CITY DWELLERS**

Among the icky things in this world, cockroaches are way up there. But in addition to being icky, according to a new study from several divisions of the National Institutes of Health, cockroaches can cause -- as well as aggravate -- childhood asthma. Although the study focused on inner-city families and children, allergist Thomas Fischer, MD, of Cincinnati Group Health Associates, says that cockroaches, which are found in even the best of buildings, can cause the nasal symptoms of allergies or intensify the wheezing and other symptoms of asthma. Their presence affects adults as well as kids.

According to Dr. Fischer, the study found cockroaches in the apartments of 85% of the city children with asthma. The only way to resolve this problem is to make sure none of the bugs or their remnants are around.

To a great degree, apartment dwellers are at the mercy of their neighbors' commitment to cleanliness, but the battle begins at home. Dr. Fischer says that everyone living in multiple-dwelling units should be focused on cleanliness. Put the trash out daily... don't let dirty dishes sit around... keep food in sealed containers and pick up pet food at night... seal cracks in the wall... and remove any standing water (cockroaches are highly associated

with water sources).

If you see any sign of them in daylight hours, even a few here and there, he says that means there are troops of them that are unseen, in the walls or around the pipes. He advises looking for the source and using nontoxic bait traps. At some point, though, it's likely that you'll need professional exterminators. *Important:* Explain that you or your child has allergies. Although the sprays today have low human toxicity, says Dr. Fischer, the exterminators may choose to use something else or will let you know how long to stay away from home for the air to clear.

Even after the bugs are gone, Dr. Fischer advises washing down the premises -- bedding, even curtains, and all surfaces -- regularly. Use the strongest agent, such as bleach and water, that the surface can tolerate. Vacuum several times a week as well. All of your efforts will pay off eventually with greatly reduced allergens in your apartment so you can breathe -- and rest -- easier.

Be well,



Carole Jackson  
Bottom Line's *Daily Health News*

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SPECIAL OFFER

## **CLAIM THE FINEST HEALTH CARE IN AMERICA, TOTALLY FREE!**

No matter how rich or poor you are, no matter how young or old... you can get medical care from the world's best doctors. How? Just by knowing who to call from the list of phone numbers Matthew Lesko reveals in [\*\*\*Bottom Line's Big Fat Book of FREE MONEY FOR EVERYONE!\*\*\*](#) Those quick calls will connect you to hundreds of cutting-edge medical programs all across the United States, funded by \$18 billion in government grants. They want you to call them, because they're probably researching your condition.

[Read on...](#)

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Sources...

Top This

- Norman J. Marcus, MD, founder, Norman Marcus Pain Institute, New York City, past president of the American Academy of Pain Medicine, author of [Freedom from Pain](#) (Fireside). Dr. Marcus was voted one of New York City's Best Doctors

- for four years in a row by *New York Magazine*. You can visit his Web site at [www.sportspainusa.com](http://www.sportspainusa.com).
- Arthritis Foundation, [www.arthritis.org](http://www.arthritis.org)

#### Caution City Dwellers

- Thomas J. Fischer, MD, Cincinnati Group Health Associates, Cincinnati, Ohio.

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