

Experts Warn Of Health Concerns From Taking Cipro

October 28, 2001 | By Tara Parker-Pope | The Wall Street Journal

After anthrax fears spurred everyone from New York's governor to hundreds of postal workers to take the antibiotic Cipro, drug-safety experts are now predicting a rash of health problems caused by the drug itself.

Most troubling is the fact that three similar drugs, all chemical cousins of Cipro, already have been pulled off the market after being linked with severe side effects and even death.

Cipro, or ciprofloxacin, is one of several fluoroquinolones, a controversial class of antibiotics that can cause a range of bizarre side effects, from psychological problems and seizures to ruptured Achilles tendons.

Cipro is generally regarded as safe, but concerns are growing as its use surges amid the anthrax scare. And some of the potential side effects of fluoroquinolones, such as cardiovascular complications, simply haven't been widely studied.

"I'm very concerned. There are safer drugs that are available for this, and they're not being used," says Raymond Woosley, vice president for health science at the University of Arizona in Tucson. "If they knew the risk of seizures and major psychosis, I don't think they would take it. I wouldn't."

Bayer says Cipro has a 14-year safety record.

At American Media, the tabloid publisher where the first case of anthrax was diagnosed and many workers are taking Cipro, some have complained of stomach upset or feeling "spacey." One employee had a severe allergic reaction and another suffered a seizure; both were hospitalized, according to an AMI employee who asked not to be named. Some workers have asked to switch drugs.

When first introduced 15 years ago, fluoroquinolones were celebrated as effective bacteria fighters without the resistance issues that sometimes render more traditional antibiotics ineffective. As use has grown, resistant strains have emerged, but the drugs remain some of the most heavily prescribed antibiotics.

But in 1992, Abbott Laboratories' temafloxacin, marketed as Omniflox, was withdrawn after only three months after 50 severe reactions, including three deaths. In 1999, 14 cases of acute liver failure, including six deaths, were linked to Pfizer's drug trovafloxacin, marketed as Trovan, prompting the FDA to severely limit its use. Later that year, Glaxo Wellcome's grepafloxacin, marketed as Raxar, was withdrawn after reports of heart rhythm abnormalities, with seven deaths.

Fluoroquinolone users who have suffered severe side effects call themselves "floxies" and have created their own Web site (www.geocities.com/quinolones). The Annals of Pharmacotherapy published a review of 45 cases of severe adverse effects from quinolones,

including 11 cases involving Cipro.

Doctors say that, in general, fluoroquinolones don't carry any higher rate of side effects than traditional antibiotics. But the side effects of fluoroquinolones are often so strange that patients may not associate them with the drug.

David A. Flockhart, professor of medicine and chief of clinical pharmacology at Indiana University School of Medicine, says as many as a third of patients taking a fluoroquinolone will experience some sort of psychiatric side effect, such as anxiety, personality change or confusion. "The psychiatric effects of the fluoroquinolones are underappreciated by the medical profession as well as by the public," says Flockhart, who has treated more than 100 patients with severe psychiatric side effects.

http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2001-10-28/news/0110270289_1_fluoroquinolones-side-effects-cipro