

# [e-drug] WSJ on side effects of Fluoroquinolones

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Health Journal

Surge in use of Cipro spurs concerns about side effects

By Tara Parker-Pope

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. Fluoroquinolones made by other manufacturers, such as Johnson & Johnson's Levaquin, also are being considered for use in treating anthrax exposure.

Cipro is generally regarded as safe, but concerns are growing as its use surges amidst 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, health science, University of Arizona in Tuscon.

Bayer declined to comment on questions about Cipro side effects.

At tabloid publisher American Media, where the first case of anthrax was diagnosed and many workers are taking Cipro, some have complained of stomach upset or feeling "spacey" since taking the drug. 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 there, after researching side effects, have asked to switch to other antibiotics.

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But in 1992 Abbott Laboratories' temafloxacin, marketed as Omniflox, was withdrawn after only three months following 50 severe cases of adverse reaction, including three deaths. In 1999, 14 cases of acute liver failure, including five 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](http://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. The Philadelphia law firm Sheller Ludwig Badey has been involved in about two dozen cases of severe quinolone side effects.

Doctors say that, in general, fluoroquinolones don't carry any higher rate of side effects than traditional antibiotics. But the nature of the side effects of fluoroquinolones often are so strange, patients often don't 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 Dr. Flockhart, who has treated more than 100 patients with severe psychiatric side effects.

Dr. Flockhart says the drugs are useful in treating infection because they quickly reach high concentrations in the blood. That means the drugs can quickly concentrate in the brain and interfere with a receptor that normally prevents seizures.

After taking a single dose of Johnson & Johnson's Floxin for a mild urinary tract infection, 36-year-old Diane Ayres suffered a severe manic reaction with confusion, vision problems and insomnia. Doctors blamed the Floxin, and the episode left her with manic-depressive illness. "These are drugs that should be reserved primarily in situations where another drug has failed," says her husband, Stephen Fried, who has written a book, "Bitter Pills: Inside the Hazardous World of Legal Drugs."

Fluoroquinolones also are known to trigger another bizarre side effect -- tendon rupture, particularly the Achilles. Kansas dermatologist J. Michael Casparian took Cipro five years ago for a cough. Six months later he was playing charades in his living room when he experienced what felt like "a baseball bat hitting my ankle." A few years later, his other Achilles tendon snapped.

It's unclear why some people react to fluoroquinolones while others do not. Someone with an existing psychiatric condition, seizure disorder or with a history of head trauma shouldn't take fluoroquinolones. In addition, a patient who is prescribed a fluoroquinolone should ask whether another antibiotic, particularly one they've used before without ill effect, couldn't be used instead.

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