



Drug FAQs for Members

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Inhaler medicines for COPD and risk of heart problems

Medicines include:

- Ipratropium (Atrovent HFA) inhaler
- Tiotropium (Spiriva) inhaler
- Albuterol and ipratropium (Combivent) inhaler

The inhaler medicines listed above are widely used to treat lung problems such as emphysema and chronic bronchitis, also known as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). These medicines open up airways in the lungs to help patients with COPD breathe better.

Two studies were published recently, which have caused confusion and concern for people taking these medicines:

- An analysis of past studies, called a meta-analysis, reported that the inhaler medicines raise the risk of heart attack, stroke, and death from heart disease. However, there were many shortcomings with how this meta-analysis study was done; so many experts in COPD are questioning whether the results are valid or useful.
- A large study, known as the UPLIFT study, was published shortly after the meta-analysis. It showed **no** increase in the risk of stroke, heart attack, death from any cause or death from heart disease in COPD patients on the medication tiotropium (Spiriva) compared to those who did not take it. The UPLIFT study seems to provide the best evidence to date that tiotropium does not increase the risk of stroke, heart attack, death from any cause or death from heart disease.

What other information is available concerning these medicines and heart problems?

- Several studies were published earlier this year suggesting a link between these medicines and heart disease. One study reported a "possible increased risk of stroke" in patients taking tiotropium (Spiriva). Another study found a possible link between ipratropium (Atrovent) and increased risk of death from heart disease or any cause.
- In contrast, several other published and unpublished studies from 2006-2008, reported no increase in the risk of stroke, heart attack, or death from all causes or death from heart disease in people taking tiotropium.
- These varying results make it difficult to reach conclusions. The FDA is currently reviewing the data from the recent UPLIFT study as well as other safety data for tiotropium and will report its findings soon.

What are the current recommendations for use of these medicines?

- Based on available data, Kaiser Permanente physician pulmonary experts from northern and southern California continue to recommend use of these inhaler medicines to treat COPD at this time. Inhaler medicines, such as ipratropium, have been used for over 20 years, and are very important and useful medicines for many patients with COPD.
- Please do not stop taking your inhaler medication. If you have questions or concerns about this information, please speak with your health care provider.
- Remember: Stop smoking. It is the single most important thing that you can do to help your lungs.

References:

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