MedicineNet Health Research Survey Report

Arthritis Pain Management after Merck’s Withdrawal of Vioxx
Survey Results

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Executive Summary

Arthritis affects more than 40 million Americans, and many have chronic pain that limits daily activity. Osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis, affects over 20 million Americans. Rheumatoid arthritis, the most disabling form of the disease, affects about 2.1 million Americans. On September 30, 2004, Merck withdrew Vioxx, its arthritis pain medication, from the market. Triggering the withdrawal were clinical tests that showed that patients taking the drug for longer than 18-months were at increased risk of heart attack and stroke. This market withdrawal and concerns about potential harmful side effects of other pain medications has set off a firestorm of media coverage.

This survey, triggered by searches for information on arthritis, represents the responses of a Web-savvy audience more interested in arthritis and pain management than the public at large.

This survey plumbs the following:

- How did patients taking Vioxx respond immediately to the withdrawal?
- What medication did former Vioxx users switch to?
- How concerned are former Vioxx users about potential/unknown side effects?
- What side effects have these patients experienced after switching to a new medication?
- Does the medication substituted for Vioxx afford the patients the same level of relief?

This survey was conducted between January 7, 2005 and January 14, 2005. The data reflects the opinions of a self-identified panel of 705 individuals visiting MedicineNet.com who indicated that they suffer from arthritis pain.

The findings show that upon the withdrawal of Vioxx from the market, 46% of survey respondents taking Vioxx contacted their physicians; 51% did not contact a physician opting for self-directed actions, and 3% took no action. Many chronic pain sufferers were prescribed alternative pain relief medication. Most shifted to Celebrex (25%), Bextra (16%), and Mobic (11%). Of former Vioxx users, 58% experienced side effects from their new medication. 41% of those experiencing side effects reported multiple side effects with upset stomach and nausea the most common. The findings also show that confusion and concern is still widespread among former Vioxx users as to the potential harmful and unknown side effects of medications: 21% are very worried, 28% somewhat worried, 16% worried, but willing to live with potential side effects in trade for relief of their pain. 26% are not sure what to believe. Of particular significance is that 42% of those surveyed indicated that they are getting less pain relief from their new medications.
Methodology

MedicineNet.com used a seven-question pop-up online survey to query 705 individuals responding to the question: “Do you suffer from arthritis pain?” There were 239 respondents, 33.9% of the total survey population, who indicated that they were taking Vioxx for arthritis pain prior to its withdrawal from the market. The results reported in this study focus on these former Vioxx users. All were visitors to the arthritis content of the MedicineNet.com site. Responses were completely anonymous, and no visitor received the survey more than once, so the aggregated results represent unique individual respondents.

THE SURVEY POPULATION

Survey respondents (705 individuals) included users of Vioxx with arthritis and other painful conditions. Among survey respondents 38% indicated that they have osteoarthritis – the most common form of arthritis. Rheumatoid arthritis patients represented 21% of the surveyed population. Respondents with psoriatic arthritis were 3% of the survey population. Of those surveyed 23% indicated that they had one of the other 100 plus forms of arthritis, and 16% of respondents indicated an interest in arthritis pain but no diagnosis. (See Figure 1: Survey Respondents by Arthritis Diagnosis)

![Figure 1: Survey Respondents by Arthritis Diagnosis](n=705)

- Osteoarthritis - 38%
- Rheumatoid Arthritis - 21%
- Other Form Arthritis - 23%
- Psoriatic Arthritis - 3%
- No Specific Diagnosis Given - 16%
The subset of survey population who were former Vioxx users predominantly suffer from osteoarthritis (49%), a form of arthritis for which Vioxx was often prescribed. Rheumatoid arthritis affects 23% of respondents formerly taking Vioxx. Psoriatic arthritis, a less common form of arthritis, affects 3% of the respondents who formerly took Vioxx. 20% of the former Vioxx users indicated that they suffered from one of the remaining 100 plus forms of arthritis. A small number 5% of surveyed former Vioxx users did not indicate a specific arthritis diagnosis. (See Figure 2: Former Vioxx Users by Arthritis Diagnosis).

**Figure 2: Former Vioxx Users by Arthritis Diagnosis**

n=239

- Osteoarthritis - 49%
- Rheumatoid Arthritis - 23%
- Other Form Arthritis - 20%
- Psoriatic Arthritis - 3%
- No Specific Diagnosis Given - 5%
Findings

The survey investigated five areas: how did patients taking Vioxx respond immediately to the withdrawal; what medication did these patients switch to when Vioxx became unavailable; how concerned are former Vioxx users about potential/unknown side effects from pain medications; what side effect have they experienced after switching to a new medication from Vioxx, and does the medication substituted for Vioxx afford the same level of relief as Vioxx? The results show that there is still considerable confusion and concern among former Vioxx users about changing medication and potential harmful side effects from pain relief medications. The survey also shows that many patients have experienced side effects from their new medication and that former Vioxx users are getting less relief from their pain on their new medications.

RESPONSE TO VIOXX WITHDRAWAL

Survey respondents were asked to indicate their immediate response to the withdrawal of Vioxx from the market. There were three distinct groups: Those who sought advice and alternative medication from their physicians (46%), those who did not seek a physician’s advice (51%), and those who did not take any immediate action (3%). (See Figure 3: Immediate Response to Vioxx Withdrawal). Most respondents took multiple actions – stopped taking Vioxx and contacted their doctor, or contacted doctor for advice and new medications, called physician for advice and continued to take medication on hand, etc.

Figure 3: Immediate Response to Vioxx Withdrawal
n=239

- 46% contacted physician
- 51% took self-directed action
- 3% took no action
The 51% of survey respondents who did not contact their physicians for advice or an alternative medication represent an interesting subgroup. It appears that 15% of those who did not seek a physician’s advice or medication alternative simply chose to continue taking the Vioxx medication they had already purchased. Most Vioxx users, who did not seek medical advice, were prudent in heeding the warnings about the possible harmful effects of Vioxx and sought lower risk alternatives on their own (See Figure 4: Response to Vioxx Withdrawal of Survey Respondents Not Contacting a Physician).

**Figure 4: Response to Vioxx Withdrawal of Survey Respondents Not Contacting a Physician**

*n=124*

- Stopped Vioxx Immediately - 52%
- Took OTC Pain Meds - 21%
- Continued with Vioxx - 15%
- Stopped Pain Meds - 11%
ALTERNATE MEDICATIONS

With the withdrawal of Vioxx from the market, arthritis pain sufferers were forced to look for alternatives for pain relief. Arthritis pain is persistent, and many patients rely on pain medications such as Vioxx for relief from their chronic arthritis pain. The survey shows that the most frequently prescribed alternative to Vioxx was Celebrex (25%) which has also come under scrutiny. Pfizer, the drug’s manufacturer, has recently withdrawn direct to consumer advertising for the drug. Almost a quarter of the patients formerly taking Vioxx (24%) have either discontinued medication (9%) or now rely on over the counter, OTC, (15%) medications for pain relief (See Figure 5: Former Vioxx Users -- Alternate Pain Medication).

Figure 5: Former Vioxx Users -- Alternate Pain Medication
n=239

- Celebrex - 25%
- Bextra - 16%
- Mobic - 11%
- Other Anti-Inflammatory - 21%
- OTC Pain Meds -15%
- Stopped Taking Meds - 9%
- No Alternative Specified - 3%
PATIENT ATTITUDES

The survey shows that there is still considerable concern, worry and confusion among former Vioxx users about potential and unknown side effects from medication. Of the former Vioxx users, 21% indicated that they are very worried about potential and unknown side effects and might discontinue medication. Most former Vioxx users are either somewhat worried (28%) or not sure what to believe (26%) about arthritis drug safety. Of former Vioxx users, 16% indicated that they are worried, but are willing to live with potential side effects as long as the medication relieves their pain. Only 5% indicated that they are not worried because they believe that medications are tested before being prescribed, and 4% gave no indication of their attitude (See Figure 6: Attitudes of Former Vioxx Users toward Potential Side Effects).

Figure 6: Attitudes of Former Vioxx Users toward Potential Side Effects
n=239

- Somewhat Worried - 28%
- Very Worried - 21%
- Worried and Willing to Risk - 16%
- Not Worried - 5%
- Not Sure What to Believe - 26%
- No Specified Level of Concern - 4%
SIDE EFFECTS

When Vioxx was withdrawn from the market, patients relying on this medication shifted to other medications. The survey data shows they experienced side effects from their alternative medications. Of the survey respondents formerly taking Vioxx (239), 58% reported experiencing some side effects from the new medication which they are taking for arthritis pain relief. Of the subset of patients experience side effects, 41% had multiple side effects, 17% experience only upset stomach or nausea, 15% an unspecified side effect, 14% weight gain alone, 12% just headache, and 1% abdominal pain (See Figure 7: Survey Respondent Experiencing Side Effects). For those experiencing multiple side effects, upset stomach and nausea were most frequently reported (58%) in combination with other side effects.

Figure 7: Survey Respondent Experiencing Side Effects
n=138
PAIN RELIEF EXPERIENCED

Survey respondents were asked whether the medication they changed to when Vioxx was withdrawn from the market provided better, the same or less pain relief than Vioxx. The 239 former Vioxx users reported mixed results. Most respondents (42%) report less relief from their pain with the new medication than with Vioxx. A smaller group (9%) saw improved pain relief with the Vioxx alternatives. 19% experienced the same levels of pain relief with their new medication as with Vioxx, and 25% experienced no measurable level of pain relief, and 4% did not specify their experience (See Figure 8: Former Vioxx Users and Pain Relief Experience with New Medication).

Figure 8: Former Vioxx Users and Pain Relief Experience with New Medication
n=239
Conclusions

The following conclusions can be drawn from this survey:

- In response to the announced withdrawal of Vioxx from the market, 46% of survey respondents taking Vioxx contacted their physicians; 51% did not contact a physician opting for self-directed actions, and 3% took no action. It seems that self-management is common.

- Most former Vioxx users (51%) who did not contact their physicians took significant action based on media announcements: stopped taking the medication (52%), shifted to OTC medications (21%), stopped taking pain medication (11%). These data indicate a substantial impact of the media on medication decision-making.

- The medicines most commonly prescribed for arthritis pain as alternatives to Vioxx were: Celebrex (25%), Bextra (16%), and Mobic (11%). 21% of former Vioxx users shifted to other anti-inflammatory medications.

- Confusion and concern is still widespread among former Vioxx users as to the potential harmful and unknown side effects of medications: 21% are very worried, 28% somewhat worried, 16% worried, but willing to live with potential side effects in trade for relief of their pain. 26% are not sure what to believe.

- Of former Vioxx users, 58% experienced side effects from their new medication. 41% of those experiencing side effects reported multiple side effects with upset stomach and nausea the most common. It seems that a change in medication carries a significant risk of encountering side effects.

- Of former Vioxx users 42% responded that they are currently getting less relief from the alternative medication prescribed; 9% found improved relief and 19% the same level of relief. Switching pain medication is often ineffective.
MedicineNet.com – Additional Resources

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- **Relevant** -- doctors select articles and news items that are clinically relevant.

**MedicineNet.com’s Arthritis Overview**
http://www.medicinenet.com/arthritis/focus.htm

**MedicineNet Arthritis Main Article**
http://www.medicinenet.com/arthritis/article.htm

**MedicineNet Pain Article**
http://www.medicinenet.com/chronic_pain/article.htm

**MedicineNet Home Page**
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**Symptoms and Signs**
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**Procedures and Tests**
http://www.medicinenet.com/procedures_and_tests/article.htm

**Medications (non-prescription and prescription drugs)**
http://www.medicinenet.com/medications/article.htm

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