

# Give me something for the pain But what

## The Agony and the Remedy

Is it safe to take painkillers? What type should be used for what condition? Health correspondent **Salma Khalik** finds out.

**H**ow safe are painkillers? Doubts about this surfaced recently, with two drugs that were considered very safe withdrawn from the market.

Vioxx was pulled out in September last year and Bextra earlier this month, because they increase the risk of heart attacks and stroke.

A study of 2,600 people showed that taking 25mg of Vioxx daily for more than 18 months doubles the risk of getting a heart attack.

But it found no increase in risk for patients who used it in the short term.

On April 7, the United States Food and Drug Administration asked Pfizer, the maker of Bextra, to withdraw it from the market because it had the same risks as Vioxx.

Now the FDA fears the added risk is not limited to just these two drugs, but is an effect

found in most non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (Nsaids), the umbrella class of drugs these two belong to. It wants prominent warnings on the packaging of all these painkillers.

Singapore has yet to decide on this issue, although a panel of pain experts met to discuss it last week. The Health Sciences Authority is expected to issue guidelines soon.

Nsaids are commonly used for short term conditions such as headaches, menstrual cramps, muscle pain, fever and dental pain. They are also commonly prescribed for long-term pain relief.

Despite the warnings, patients shouldn't abandon these drugs altogether. If they are worried about the side effects, they should discuss alternatives with their doctors.

Said pain specialist Yeo Sow Nam of Singapore General Hospital (SGH): "Nsaids are