

In the swirl of statistics constantly spinning around us, here's one that caught my eye: The fifth leading cause of preventable disease and death in America is--Our medicines.

Specifically, adverse reactions to prescription drugs are responsible for 100,000 deaths a year. This is but one of the startling findings in an important and easy-to-use book called Worst Pills, Best Pills, just published by the Health Research Group of the consumer watchdog organization, Public Citizen. Pill by pill, this 900-page compilation profiles in plain English pluses and minuses of the medicines you or a loved one might be taking.

There has been a lot of publicity recently about Vioxx, a heavily-advertised widely-consumed arthritis drug that Merck & Co. had to pull off the market because it was found to increase the risk of heart attacks and strokes. The industry rushed out to say that Vioxx is a rare exception to an otherwise perfectly safe plethora of pills on the market.

Not. The Health Research Group finds that 53 top-selling prescribed drugs "should not be taken under any circumstances." It also lists 181 drugs under its "Do Not Use" category - ranging from antidepressants to toenail-fungus drugs - offering safer alternatives to each.

Besides the dangers of specific pills, the greater problem is that America has become massively overdosed. Thanks to pharmaceutical sales reps that hustle doctors to push their brands, and thanks to the surge of slick drug ads on TV, we have a national drug problem. Indeed, the book's researchers concludes that "the greatest epidemic of drug abuse in American society is among those patients who are the victims of misprescribing or overprescribing."

The good news is that each of us can do something about it. To find out more about Worst Pills, Best Pills, call 1-800-289-3787, or go to www.worstpills.org.