

BOTTOM LINE  
**Natural Healing**  
With Dr. Mark Stengler

DEEPER CURES FROM AMERICA'S TOP NATURAL PHYSICIAN

**Bottom Line Publications**

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## Zelnorm for Irritable Bowel Syndrome

**IRRITABLE BOWEL SYNDROME (IBS)** is a chronic condition that is estimated to affect up to 20% of the US population. Symptoms include diarrhea and/or constipation, abdominal pain, cramping, gas and nausea.

In 2002, a drug called *tegaserod* (Zelnorm) was approved by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the short-term treatment of IBS in women with constipation. Since then, it has been prescribed for 68% of IBS cases in the US, according to the drug's manufacturer, Novartis.

Is Zelnorm the drug that women with IBS have been waiting for? First, it's important to understand that Zelnorm was approved for only the short-term treatment of women with IBS whose main symptom is constipation (hard stools or difficulty passing stools). Women with diarrhea should not use Zelnorm because it can worsen diarrhea.

Zelnorm has never been shown to be effective for men with IBS, but it is used for chronic idiopathic (from an unknown cause) constipation in men and women under age 65. It also is not recommended for people who have a history of bowel obstruction and/or gallbladder disease because it can worsen both conditions.

Zelnorm is one of a new class of drugs known as *serotonin-4 receptor agonists*, which activate receptors for

the relaxing neurotransmitter *serotonin* in the digestive tract. This action is thought to normalize digestive tract movement. Studies done with Zelnorm show a mild benefit, such as improved bowel movements and reduced abdominal pain, discomfort and bloating, but the drug's long-term safety and effectiveness have not been established. The most common side effects include headache, abdominal pain, diarrhea, nausea and dizziness.

In April 2004, the FDA warned people to stop taking Zelnorm immediately if they develop rectal bleeding, bloody diarrhea or new or worsening abdominal pain. These are symptoms of intestinal ischemia, a potentially fatal condition in which the supply of blood and oxygen to the intestines is compromised. The FDA's caution was based on information from clinical trials and "postmarketing reports"—meaning, essentially, that people who had taken Zelnorm had unwittingly served as guinea pigs to determine the drug's side effects.

### A BETTER OPTION

Because Zelnorm has undergone no long-term studies, has the potential for some very serious side effects and has not been shown to be effective in men or patients with diarrhea-associated IBS, I believe that you can find better

relief with nontoxic natural therapies.

IBS is a disease of modern times, which are marked by fast food, high stress and overuse of drugs (antibiotics and steroids, in particular, destroy "friendly" bacteria that help digest food). I have found that natural therapies for IBS have a very high success rate in both men and women. I'm confident that the benefits of a holistic approach with a healthful (high-fiber, low-sugar) diet, nutritional supplements that aid digestion (probiotics, enzymes and digestive herbal tonics) and stress-reduction techniques (exercise, prayer and counseling) far exceed the mild benefits of Zelnorm. And, of course, the drug's serious side effects would not be an issue with a natural approach.

In my opinion, Zelnorm is a waste of time and money and not worth the risk. Save the \$170 you would spend on Zelnorm each month and invest it instead in healthful food and supplements that aid digestion. My natural approach for treating IBS will appear in an upcoming issue of *Bottom Line Natural Healing*. ■

### Reference

G. Robert deYoung, PharmD, *American Family Physician*, January 15, 2004.

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