Heartburn medications can interfere with the blood thinner Plavix, a drug taken by millions of Americans to reduce risks of heart attack and stroke, federal health officials said.

The Food and Drug Administration said the stomach-soothing drugs Prilosec and Nexium cut in half the blood-thinning effect of Plavix, known generically as clopidogrel.

Regulators said the key ingredient in the heartburn medications blocks an enzyme the body needs to break down Plavix, muting the drug’s full effect. Procter & Gamble’s Prilosec OTC is available over-the-counter, while AstraZeneca’s Nexium is only available with a prescription.

“Patients at risk for heart attacks or strokes who use clopidogrel to prevent blood clots will not get the full effect of this medicine,” the agency said in a statement.

Plavix is marketed by Sanofi-Aventis and Bristol-Myers Squibb. With global sales of $8.6 billion last year, it’s the world’s second-best selling drug behind Pfizer’s cholesterol drug Lipitor.

But some consumer advocates said the agency’s action fell short, arguing that regulators should have placed the information in a “black box” warning label, the most serious available.

“This information still has not risen to as prominent a level of warning as it should have,” said Dr. Sidney Wolfe, director of Public Citizen’s health research at the consumer advocacy group Public Citizen.

Information about the drug interaction between Plavix and other medications is not new. Researchers at pharmacy benefit manager Medco Health Solutions reported last year that taking Plavix with Nexium significantly increased patients’ chances of being hospitalized for a heart attack, stroke or chest pain.

“Medical tourism slows down, but could recover”

While the economic recession has eroded the growth rate for medical and dental tourism by approximately 15.6 per cent from 2007 to 2009, the economic recovery may help spur a sustainable 55 per cent annual growth rate for the medical tourism industry by 2010, according to a new report released by the Deloitte Center for Health Solutions in the US.

Medical tourism has experienced a significant slow down driven by consumers putting off elective medical procedures over the past two years. However, a better economy and health care reform in the US will likely propel growth in the elective outpatient market, particularly if elective cosmetic and dental procedures are not considered basic benefits, the report states. In 2009, a projected number of 648,000 Americans will travel abroad for out-bound medical and dental care.

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