

Taking herb 'helps depression'

By Sinead Garvan
Newsbeat reporter

New research suggests the herbal medicine St John's Wort could be a suitable alternative for treating depression.

It is estimated that as many as one in five people suffer from the condition at some point in their life.

At the moment, GPs prescribe drugs like Prozac and Seroxat which more than 500,000 people in UK are believed to be using.

St John's Wort is a herb taken from a bright yellow star-shaped flower.

It comes in capsules, as a liquid or a tea bag. It's been used for decades as an alternative medicine for people with stress or depression.

Using St John's Wort extract might be justified, but products on the market vary considerably

Dr Klaus Linde from the Centre for Complementary Medicine in Munich, Germany

It can be bought over the counter in health food shops on the high street.

This study into how effective the herb is as a treatment was carried out in Munich, Germany.

It involved nearly 5,500 people who were all suffering from some form of depression, ranging from mild to severe.

The researchers compared the effects of St John's Wort with a placebo, or dummy pill, and a wide range of old and new anti-depressants.

Dr Klaus Linde, who led the study, said: "Overall, the St John's Wort extracts tested in the trials were superior to placebo, similarly effective as standard anti-depressants, and had fewer side effects."

Doctors think it works because the herb keeps serotonin, a chemical which makes you happy, in the brain for longer.

Dr Linde added: "Using St John's Wort extract might be justified, but products on the market vary considerably."

Prescriptions rise

There has been a push for herbal alternatives for depression because the number of prescriptions for drugs like Prozac is continuing to go up.

Last year, GPs wrote out 16 million prescriptions, a 10% increase on the year before.

The Department of Health says one in 10 under-18s suffers from depression or anxiety and there are worries about giving pills to that age group.

However, Prozac is recommended for teenagers with severe depression because it's thought the benefits outweigh any potential side effects.

We are reviewing our advice on how to treat depression amongst young people next year

Spokesman for National Institute of Clinical Excellence

NHS drug advisors say therapy should be the first course of treatment, especially among young people.

GPs argue the waiting list to see a therapist is too long and many patients need drugs while having this counselling.

The Department of Health say they will be training up more therapists to meet increasing demand.

So could this research lead to GPs prescribing herbal alternatives instead of drugs?

The National Institute of Clinical Excellence (Nice) is the organisation which advise the NHS on what drugs they should consider for treatment.

They say the only people suffering from mild depression should consider taking St John's Wort.

They advise GPs not to prescribe it.

The concern is over how it reacts with other drugs such as the contraceptive pill.

There are reported effects such as dizziness, tiredness and hair loss, although these have not been proven.

The advice to under-18s is to avoid it completely as there's not enough evidence on its effectiveness and side effects.

However, a spokesperson told Newsbeat: "We are reviewing our advice on how to treat depression amongst young people next year.

"We welcome all research into medication and would consider this research as long as it is robust."

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