

Wonder drug for smokers linked to seven deaths

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More than 1,300 people who have used the drug Champix and have reported possible side effects

A new anti-smoking 'wonder drug' taken by nearly a quarter of a million Britons is feared to be linked to the deaths of seven people.

Their cases are included in a dossier featuring more than 1,300 people who have used the drug Champix and have reported possible side effects, ranging from headaches, nausea and vomiting to heart disorders and suicidal thoughts.

When Champix was launched a year ago it was hailed as the most effective weapon in the fight to give up smoking.

In trials, 22.5 per cent of quitters who took the prescription-only drug were still not smoking after a year, compared with 16 per cent of people who used nicotine-replacement therapy and just three per cent who attempted to stop by using willpower alone.

Have you ever suffered side effects from using anti-smoking drugs? Email us in confidence by [clicking here](#)

The non-nicotine product works on brain receptors to relieve the cravings and withdrawal symptoms associated with quitting.

Pfizer, the manufacturers of Champix, maintain there is no evidence the drug has dangerous side effects. But the Government's medicines watchdog, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), has received numerous reports of possible problems. Earlier this month, the European Medicines Agency ordered a

safety warning to be included in the drug's patient information, saying that any Champix users who develop suicidal thoughts should stop their treatment and contact their doctor.

Last night, the MHRA said it was 'monitoring the emerging safety information concerning Champix'.

The seven suspicious deaths – reported to the MHRA by doctors, nurses and patients – were attributed in two cases to heart problems and in one case to vascular disorder. A further three were put down to 'general health problems'. The other reported case was the suicide of 39-year-old Omer Jama, an editor at Sky TV, who slashed his wrists weeks after starting a course of the pills.

Last night, Dr John Griffin, the ex-editor of the medical journal Adverse Drug Reactions, who has been an expert in the safety of medicines for more than 35 years, said: 'Some anti-smoking remedies contain a substance which also has anti-depressant actions. A number of anti-depressants have an effect that causes people who want to commit suicide to do so.'

'Any drug with a propensity to increase suicide risk has to be treated very seriously.'

The MHRA figures show that up to December 18 there were 1,335 reports of UK patients taking Champix suffering suspected adverse reactions. Some patients experienced several problems.

The most common reactions were psychiatric problems (748 cases), gastrointestinal disorders (819), nervous-system disorders (511) and heart disorders (70).

In the US, where the drug has been taken by four million people, there were 5,157 complaints about it in just one week – 55 of which involved suicides and 199 suicidal thoughts – and an investigation into the drug was launched.

A spokesman for Pfizer said: 'There is no scientific evidence establishing a causal relationship between varenicline [the active ingredient in Champix] and these reported events. Patient safety is our priority.'

• **Omer was 'spaced out' on pills...then he killed himself**

Omer Jama was trying to beat a 15-year, 20-a-day smoking habit when he slashed his wrists in October.

The 39-year-old TV editor from Bolton had been taking Champix tablets for four weeks. His family say he had no history of depression and think the drugs may have affected his mental health.

He had split from his wife, but his brother Ali, 41, said: 'He had so much to live for. I thought about the pills straight away.'

Mr Omer's friend Gary Tonge, 39, said his girlfriend suffered irrational behaviour for four weeks while on Champix. 'One minute she'd be crying her eyes out, the next

she'd be aggressive so I took the tablets off her and she was back to normal within a week,' he said.

'I asked Omer if he was OK. He said the tablets were making him feel a bit spaced out but he was determined to give up.'