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Complementary medicines can help mild depression
and premenstrual syndrome.

Not all dietary supplements and "alternative" products are harmless though. German Institute urges consumers to be more critical of health claims.

Cologne, 25 June 2008: Many people use "alternative" or complementary products because they see them as a more gentle form of medicine. The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care has now analysed the latest research on several products and released the results along with a guide for consumers.

St John's wort (hypericum), for example, could help ease mild depression, but it does not help with severe depression. It also probably cannot help with the symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS). However, calcium and vitamin B6 (pyridoxine) might help relieve PMS. On the other hand, evening primrose oil has not been proven to help.

Herbal medicines and dietary supplements can also have risks

According to the Institute, conflicting research results in recent years have caused confusion and controversy about St. John's wort. It concluded this is partly because the effects vary from product to product, and the effect depends too on how severe depression is. The controversy highlights the importance of looking at all clinical trial results to gain a better picture of health care treatments.

"Consumers need to be more critical of all health claims," according to the Institute's Director, Professor Peter Sawicki. "This is as true of dietary supplements and complementary medicines as it is of prescription medicine. Just because a product is made from a plant or vitamins, it does not mean it is necessarily safe in very high doses or for frequent use. And not all medicinal products can provide as much relief as patients expect." The growing evidence that high doses of some vitamins and antioxidants can cause cancer or earlier death is an important reminder that dietary supplements are not necessarily harmless.

All treatments and products should face the same scientific standards for effectiveness and safety

Patients need to consider several questions before choosing any treatment, including a dietary supplement. Professor Sawicki: "Doctors and patients need to know whether treatments have been proven to work in enough good clinical trials that measured benefits large enough to matter to the patient. Whether a medicine is made from a plant or

manufactured in a laboratory, the same scientific standards apply if you want to know which treatment might be the best for you."

To help consumers, the Institute also published a new guide for consumers considering using dietary supplements or complementary medicine products. The fact sheet lists key questions that could help people make decisions for or against a particular treatment. The fact sheet, along with research results on a range of treatments, is available from today on www.informedhealthonline.org (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org>).

The Institute's website, Informed Health Online, keeps consumers informed about up-to-date evidence on health issues. Information released today addresses depression, premenstrual syndrome and nausea after an operation. Readers can subscribe to a newsletter (URL: <http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/index.258.69.en.html>) to stay up-to-date with the Institute's publications for consumers.

Contact:

Hilda Bastian
Editor-in-Chief, Informed Health Online

www.informedhealthonline.org (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org>)

German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

Tel.: +49 (0)221 / 356 85-0, E-Mail: information@iqwig.de (URL: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/mailto:information@iqwig.de>)

Newsletter

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<http://www.gesundheitsinformation.de/index.258.69.en.html>)

subscription:

Glossary

calcium

Calcium is an important mineral for human health. It is one of the building blocks for bones and teeth, and it is necessary for blood clotting, the muscles and the nerves. Calcium occurs in milk and milk products, as well as in green leafy vegetables. People can get a calcium deficiency if they have a chronic inflammatory bowel disease, as well as in pregnancy or during breastfeeding.

evidence

Evidence is what we call scientific proof from well-conducted, good-quality scientific trials that have been carefully designed to answer specific questions. Depending on the types of questions, different scientific research methods (types of study) are most appropriate to find reliable answers to these questions. Randomized controlled trials (RCTs), for example, are the best way to get reliable evidence on the effectiveness of medical treatments (interventions). This type of study, however, is not the best form of evidence for all possible questions, and does not provide the best answers to all kinds of questions, either. Epidemiological studies, for example, are very suitable for establishing well-founded proof for the spreading of a disease in the population.

depression

Depression is one of the most common mental illnesses, and it can be mild, moderate or serious. There are several different types of depression that can be recognised by different signs. Which symptoms of depression occur and how strong and frequent they are vary from person to person. People in any social or age group can be affected, both women and men. If someone has had at least two of the following symptoms for longer than two weeks, it might mean that they are depressed: deep sadness; listlessness; loss of interest in the things they usually care about.

dietary supplement

Dietary supplements (also known as food supplements or nutritional supplements) are concentrated vitamins, minerals, trace elements, fibers and/or other substances that are intended to supplement the diet. Advocates of dietary supplements claim that they have a certain, often preventive or strengthening effect on the body. They are available as capsules, pills, powder or ampules, for

example. From a legal point of view, dietary supplements rank among foods and therefore – as opposed to medications – do not need official approval. More information is available on the website of the German Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (Bundesinstitut für Risikobewertung, BfR): [To the BfR website \(in English\)](#)

Sources

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG)

The German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG) was established by legislation to provide evaluations of the effectiveness, quality and efficiency of healthcare services. This includes the assessment of medicines as well as the publication of health information for consumers and patients.

Evidence basis of our health information

Our information is based primarily on systematic reviews of the effects of health care. Systematic reviews are necessary to gain an objective picture of health care. In order to do this, a clear question is formulated. Researchers then find all the relevant studies that could answer this question. They then evaluate those studies.

You can find a list of the evidence and other scientific literature on which this information is based at www.informedhealthonline.org

Disclaimer

This information was prepared and published by the German Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG). It is based on the evidence and other scientific literature available at the time of publication. The information is intended for the use of patients in Germany. It is not intended to for use to diagnose illnesses and the information is not intended to substitute for medical advice.