

Depressing News About Anti-Depressants

I have been planning to write about this topic for some time. Before I got around to it, the best article on the topic that I have read was recently published in *Mens Health* magazine. The article was written by Paul Scott and I will be summarizing it in my column, but if you would like to read the original article, visit www.menshealth.com.

The topic is antidepressant medications. For years these medications have been heralded as miracles of modern medicine. They have not only been prescribed for depression, but for many conditions for which they were not studied to treat, including chronic pain and PMS. In fact they are the most widely prescribed medications in the U.S. with doctors writing nearly a quarter of a billion prescriptions in 2007. They are so common that traces of antidepressant medications can even be found in the water supplies of most municipalities.

Much to the dismay of doctors everywhere and pharmaceutical companies who make 12 billion dollars a year on the sales of these drugs, a new study casts a dark cloud of doubt on their effectiveness. According to the drug companies own research, the medications have been shown to be no better than a placebo for mild to moderate depression. In other words, any benefit that the patient receives is due to their belief that the medication is helping, not the active ingredients of the pills. The average mood enhancement gained by using an anti-depressant compared to the mood enhancement afforded by taking a sugar pill, is about the same as what one would accomplish by getting a good nights sleep. For severe cases of depression, anti-depressants only provide a very marginal benefit.

One of the reasons it has taken so long for the poor performance of anti-depressants to surface is the fact that nearly all studies of anti-depressants are performed by the drug companies that sell them. Studies that show little or no benefit or studies that show higher side effects are often not published. Of 74 studies that were filed with the FDA, 38 showed positive benefits of anti-depressants. 37 of the 38 were published. 24 studies showed negative benefits. Only 8 of these were published and 5 of those were spun to make them sound positive.

Drug companies also frequently use a controversial research tactic know as a run in period. What they do is pre-screen study participants to see if they are likely to be placebo responders. They then eliminate these people from the final study. This artificially makes the drug seem more effective than it really is.

If you currently take anti-depressant medications you might want to talk to your doctor about this new study. You might also want to consider exercise. It has been shown to be more effective than anti-depressants in elevating mood.