

Want to be happy, energetic and generally on top of things? Just pop a pill. At least,

that's what supplement manufacturers are suggesting. From perk-me-ups to memory boosters, there seems to be a supplement for everything. And with retail pharmacies, health food stores and multi-level marketers jumping onto the bandwagon, supplements are big business indeed.

But should you allow yourself to be swept away by these incredible claims and buy into the plethora of supplements? Here are a few tips and pointers:

Food for the mood

Can food make you happy? That's the question researchers have been trying to answer.

● **NO FISHY BUSINESS** Well, it appears to be so, at least when it comes to fish oil. Studies have found that people who eat more fish are less likely to suffer from

depression. Why? Well, after putting their heads together and doing some serious research work, scientists have emerged with two conclusions:

- 1) Omega-3 found in fish oils may be beneficial for your health in general
- 2) Regular fish oil supplementation may bring about mood improvement

A few years ago, Finnish researchers got the ball rolling by suggesting that regular fish-lovers have a 37 per cent lower risk of being depressed and a 43 per cent lower risk of having thoughts of harming themselves. As can be expected, this exciting finding attracted wide publicity and fuelled further studies.

Since then, at least three studies have found that fish oil supplementation make a significant difference to sufferers of depression. Of these, one small study found benefits for children with depression. So if your child is always feeling blue and you are reluctant to start him on anti-depressants, fish oil may provide a safer alternative.

The happy pill

Can supplements help you to snap out of depression and get a good night's rest? Dr Ken Ung shares some insights



And if that's not enough to convince you, fish oil also appears to help sufferers with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and poor concentration and memory. It has been shown to reduce the risks of heart disease in some studies as well.

As a guide, 1–3 grams of fish oil each day would be a safe bet. But while supplements may be fine, the real thing is even better. So why not add some fresh mackerel, salmon or tuna to the menu of the day.

● **FLOWER POWER** Another supplement for depression is St Johnswort, extracted from a plant with yellow flowers. Some studies show that for those with minor depression, it is almost as good as antidepressants. Unfortunately, two more recent large-scale studies did not show any significant difference in those taking St Johnswort and those taking a placebo, an inactive medicine made to look like the real thing.

Nevertheless, if you're suffering from mild depression and don't want to take antidepressants, St Johnswort is worth a try. Bear in mind, however, that if you are adding it to an antidepressant, it can worsen the side effects of the antidepressant. Also take note that a common side effect of St Johnswort is increased sensitivity to sunlight and sunburns. So slap on some sunscreen before you head out.

● **NO STRESS** If, instead of moping around, you're tearing at your hair in stress, vitamin B complex may prove to be particularly useful. Studies have shown that the lack of vitamin B1, 2, 6 and 12 may lead to psychological imbalances. Of course, deficiency is uncommon in an affluent society like Singapore.

There are, however, some studies – enough to support its use – that show that vitamin B complex has a positive



The fine print

In general, there tends to be much less information on supplements than medication. Why? Because unlike medicine, supplements are usually naturally occurring chemicals that no one can patent. Simply put, Ah Kow next door can benefit from your research and sell the product for a cheaper price since he didn't have to pay for research. This also means that no one finds it worth paying millions of dollars on R&D.

Given the unsettling lack of research, are supplements safe? Well, by and large, they are fairly safe and well-tolerated by the body, but every now and then, you'll get a horror story like Slim 10. So if you are keen to try a supplement, take the maximum dose the manufacturer recommends for a month and watch for effects. If it delivers on its promises without any adverse side effect, then, by all means, carry on taking it. If not, why waste money?

To check on specific supplements, visit the American National Institute of Health Office of Dietary Supplements' website at <http://dietary-supplements.info.nih.gov/>

effect on the mood, anxiety and energy levels. So consider taking vitamin B complex in a multi-vitamin tablet – just like in food, vitamins tend to work better when taken together.

Dose for a doze

Now, no amount of supplements is sufficient to lift you out of depression if you've been tossing and turning all night. Fortunately, if you find it virtually impossible to get some shuteye, pharmacies can offer some help.

● **THE DRACULA HORMONE** Yes, that's what melatonin has been dubbed – and for good reason. Produced in the darkness, this naturally occurring hormone signals to your body when it's time to shut down.

Of course, if you have taken sleeping pills before, don't expect melatonin to be anywhere as fast-acting or effective. In fact, research suggests that melatonin may not be useful for most people with insomnia – it will very likely be much more effective for jet-lag. However, if you have tried everything and can't bear another sleepless night, melatonin may yet be worth a shot. 1–1.5 mg half an hour to an hour before sleeping should suffice.

● **DO AS THE ROMANS DO** Valerian is another plant that may be useful for those with problems finding dreamland. This plant has been used since ancient Roman times to help with sleeping and relaxation. Results from studies, however, have been inconsistent – some studies show benefits while others do not.

On the plus side, few side effects have been noted, so 400-900 mg of the extract half an hour to an hour before sleep is worth considering if you have mild insomnia. Some manufacturers even combine Valerian with Melatonin for enhanced results.

That said, a supplement is what its name suggests – it is meant to supplement and not substitute a healthy diet. And, in many cases, supplements tend to be over-hyped. Nevertheless they are a convenient and relatively safe means of solving a mild problem. Just don't expect supplements to cure illnesses or disorders – if symptoms persist, seek professional assessment and help! ♥

This article is contributed by Dr Ken Ung, senior consultant child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Pacific Healthcare.