

AAP NEWS STORY

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By Janelle Miles, National Medical Correspondent

Australian scientists are testing fish oil as an anti-depressant after studies showing countries with high seafood consumption have lower rates of mood disorders.

Sydney's Black Dog Institute has started recruiting people with mild to moderate depression aged 21 to 65 to assess the benefits of fish oil supplements, rich in Omega-3 fatty acids. In the first, six week phase of the study, half the participants will receive daily doses of fish oil, while the remainder will be given an inactive placebo, so researchers can assess any differences. The next eight-week phase will ensure all those in the trial will receive the active treatment.

"There's been studies done internationally showing that countries which eat more fish, such as Japan and Norway, have lower rates of depression," explained psychiatrist Anne-Marie Rees. "Also, it's been shown that Omega-3 levels are lower in depressed patients. Therefore, it makes sense to conduct trials looking at treating people who have depression with Omega-3 since depletion is likely to be linked to this disease."

Around 60 per cent of the brain is composed of fats, the most important being Omega-3, such as those found in fish oil, and Omega-6. Black Dog Institute executive director Gordon Parker said scientists believed Omega-3s were important for the permeability of cell membranes, allowing the free flow of chemicals in and out of neurons in the brain. But we don't include as much food rich in Omega-3s - such as salmon, tuna, sardines and mackerel - in our diets as in the past, which may be contributing to mood disorders.

"The suspicion is that dietary changes, if they are playing a part in mood disorders, may have been creeping up on us over the last three or four decades as we've been eating more processed foods," Professor Parker said.

Psychiatrists at the Black Dog Institute have recently conducted a similar study to gauge the effect of using fish oil supplements as a treatment for women with post-natal depression. Results of that trial are pending.

Anti-depressant drugs are still considered the gold standard treatment for depression, but because they cannot be tolerated in some people, scientists believe it is important to investigate alternatives. Prof Parker said fish oil was relatively free of side effects, although those on anticoagulant medication, such as warfarin, may be at risk of a slight increase in bleeding. "In comparison to the average drug, it is very, very safe," he said.

People with depression wanting to take part in the trial should contact the study coordinator on 02 9382 4521 or email omega3study@unsw.edu.au

They must have had depression for at least six weeks but less than a year and should not be currently taking anti-depressant medication.

The fish oil product to be used in the study contains higher doses of Omega-3 than generally available in over-the-counter dietary supplements.