Antidepressents vs. 5-HTP supplements [1]

Dear Alice,

My boyfriend recently met with a psychologist for some issues he's having (social disorder, impulse disorder, ADD and chemical imbalance) and the doctor suggested Prozac. I've read up on Prozac and it's side effect and I don't think it is the best route for what he is dealing with. It seems to have so many adverse effects that I fear it would only make the problems worsen.

I've also done some research on the supplement 5-HTP and how it works with ones brain chemistry and increasing the serotonin levels. My question is... Which would be more effective? What are the pros and cons of both antidepressents and 5-HTP supplements?

Thank you!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Your boyfriend is lucky to have someone like you helping to research healthcare options. There are a lot of treatments for mental health issues, though some have been proven more effective than others. Prozac, although it may have unpleasant side effects [2], is effective. 5-HTP, on the other hand, has not yet proven to be an effective treatment.

5-HTP, which stands for 5-hydroxytryptophan (also called 5-HT), is considered a complementary treatment for depression, and studies to date on its effectiveness for treating depression have been inconclusive. In theory, 5-HTP supplements work to increase serotonin levels, and since depression may be related to serotonin levels, 5-HTP could work. One pro would be that 5-HTP is less expensive than Prozac. The known side effects of 5-HTP include nausea and diarrhea.

It's a good idea to use any dietary supplements with caution, since the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not regulate supplements to ensure safety and only acts when supplements are found to be unsafe. There have been some reports that have called 5-HTP's purity into question after some people became ill after taking it.

Prozac, also known as Fluoxetine, is from the family of antidepressant drugs known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) that work to increase serotonin levels in the brain. Some known side effects of Prozac include decreased sex drive, restlessness, and skin
rash. Fast heartbeat, dizziness and seizures are rare side effects. The pros of Prozac and other antidepressants are they have been well tested and have proven to be effective treatments prior to becoming available for prescription. Prozac in particular is effective for depression, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder [3], bulimia, and premenstrual dysphoric disorder [4], but is also prescribed for other mental health conditions. Antidepressants are also monitored by the FDA to ensure safety and purity.

Although your concerns and fears about the side effects of Prozac are valid, how does your boyfriend feel about taking it? Perhaps you should trust that your boyfriend's psychologist knows what may be the best method of treatment for his issues. Even though there are side effects to taking Prozac, sometimes side effects are worth the positive long-term benefits of the drug. Additionally, side-effects do not occur for everyone using the medication.

If your boyfriend does not want to take Prozac, it's recommended that he talk with his health care provider about other options. He may get a referral to a mental health professional through his primary health care provider, or from the American Psychiatric Association [5], the American Psychological Association [6], or the National Association of Social Workers [7].

Although it is ultimately his choice about treatment, your support is a valuable asset for his recovery, so keep it up!

Alice!
Category: Emotional Health [8]

Related questions

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Resources

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Mental Health Service (CUMC) [16]
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