American College of Neuropsychopharmacology

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CONTACT: Sharon Reis, (202) 745-5103
sreis@gymr.com
Tamara Moore, (202) 745-5114
tmoore@gymr.com

Omega-3 Supplements Show Promise in Alleviating Depression

MIAMI, FL (December 8, 2010) – A new analysis of the effects of omega-3 essential fatty acids offers the hope of enhanced treatment options for tens of millions of people with depression. Two critical omega-3 essential fatty acids available from certain food or nutritional supplements but not manufactured by the body—Eicosapentenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic (DHA)—play a role in optimal brain functioning and have antidepressant benefits that have not been fully recognized. The results were presented today at the annual meeting of the American College of Neuropsychopharmacology.

In a meta-analysis of 15 randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled studies, researchers from the University of Illinois at Chicago, led by John M. Davis, M.D., research professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago and ACNP member, found that patients taking omega-3 with either EPA or a combination of EPA and DHA experienced clear antidepressant benefits. However, across studies, patients taking the pure DHA form of omega-3 saw no antidepressant effect. Dr. Davis's team included researchers Ivan T. Murray, M.R.C.Psych., Shauna Glynn, M.R.C.Psych., Joseph R. Hibbeln, M.D., Brian P. Hallahan, M.R.C.Psych., M.D.

"Our analysis clarifies the precise type of omega-3 fatty acid that is effective for people with depression and explains why previous findings have been contradictory," said Davis. "The EPA predominant formulation is necessary for the therapeutic action to occur. The DHA predominant formulation does not have antidepressant efficacy."

While scientists noted that omega-3 produces beneficial effects in patients with depression, EPA does not improve mood in people who are not depressed. In several studies, people without depression experienced no difference in mood as a result of omega-3 consumption. In another study Davis and his team found that women with inadequate omega-3 intake were more likely to experience depression during and after pregnancy than women with adequate omega-3 in their diets,

"The findings are unambiguous," said Davis. "Omega-3 fatty acids have antidepressant properties and this effect is ready to be tested in a large study to establish the dose range and to pave the way for FDA approval. In the meantime, omega-3 fatty acids containing EPA could be useful to augment effects of antidepressant medications.

However, scientists caution that patients should always talk with their mental health professional before taking omega-3 fatty acids to alleviate symptoms of depression.

Approximately 20.9 million American adults suffer from mood disorders, including depression, the world's fourth leading cause of morbidity and death.

Dr. Davis' team is now examining the link between soy intake and depression, and expects those findings to be published next year. He noted that soy products contain omega-6 fatty acids, which compete with omega-3's.

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ACNP, founded in 1961, is a professional organization of nearly 1,000 leading scientists, including four Nobel Laureates. The mission of ACNP is to further research and education in neuropsychopharmacology and related fields in the following ways: promoting the interaction of a broad range of scientific disciplines of brain and behavior in order to advance the understanding of prevention and treatment of disease of the nervous system including psychiatric, neurological, behavioral and addictive disorders; encouraging scientists to enter research careers in fields related to these disorders and their treatment; and ensuring the dissemination of relevant scientific advances.