

## Fruits of the sea

Many humble seaweeds found round our chilly coasts have health-giving properties – and even bathing in seaweed can be beneficial. Bladder wrack, kelp and laver all contain a range of important minerals, like iron, iodine, calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and potassium – often in greater amounts than other foods. A third of seaweed contains easily-absorbed protein, vitamins, especially B12, and fibre; half is carbohydrates; and around two per cent is fat.

Seaweeds can help boost the immune system and rebalance hormones, reduce bloating and help you lose weight as part of a weight loss programme. However, the salt content is high, so it's best to have small amounts.

The plants are often available dried or as tablets, but some fishmongers sell fresh samphire or carrageen. Laver is available, ready cooked, in tins – delicious mixed with oatmeal, made into cakes and fried with a little bacon, or mixed with fresh Seville orange juice as a relish for roast lamb.

Marine algae such as spirulina (blue-green algae) and chlorella are believed to have many health-giving properties. Spirulina contains thousands of minute aquatic plants rich in proteins, vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids, and may help cut cholesterol, though evidence is anecdotal. They are found in salty lakes, but are now grown in outdoor tanks for easier harvesting.

The fibrous outer layer of chlorella (green algae) has been shown to bind with heavy metals and pesticides. The inner nutrients include high levels of chlorophyll containing magnesium essential for heart health. Chlorophyll help carry oxygen round the body to the brain and stimulates the production of red blood cells.

It's believed seaweed and fresh sea water baths can really benefit our health. People with psoriasis who bathed for an hour a day in the Dead Sea found their condition improved 88 per cent. The Dead Sea contains 33 per cent salt and a huge variety of minerals – simply floating in it can soothe joint pain, reduce allergies, boost energy levels and cleanse the body of toxins. Thalassotherapy centres around Europe's coasts may provide similar benefits, though the waters are far less dense in minerals and salt.



## Fish oils and depression

### Could the sea provide an answer to one of modern life's fastest growing complaints?

Judy Hobson reports

**B**Y THE year 2020, depression may be our second biggest health burden after heart disease, but scientists claim a high quality fish oil may be a natural way to treat even severe cases. The key to the treatment is elcosapentaenoic acid (EPA), an omega-3 fatty acid. Brain scans show that it helps to regenerate the brain, and it is thought it stimulates the stem cells into producing new nerve cells.

Dr Basant Puri, consultant psychiatrist and senior lecturer at London's Imperial College MRI Unit believes EPA can change everyone's lives because it improves overall brain performance, whether people are depressed or not, and reduces the risk of heart attack, stroke and deep vein thrombosis.

This breakthrough is the result of a body of research compiled by an international group of medical scientists over the last two years. It suggests that a lack of EPA in our diet may be a significant cause of depression.

Dr Puri prescribes high quality EPA supplements to depressed patients at his Hammersmith Hospital clinic in London and says all are responding well. "Studies

show this nutrient, found in high quality fish oil, can clear the symptoms of depression within three to four weeks and then, by taking a daily supplement, the patient can ward off further attacks," he says.

Dr Puri first came across EPA when he was studying nutrition as part of his medical course and began to wonder why nature caused us to have EPA and what its function was. Later, as a psychiatrist and brain imager, he was able to see at first hand the benefits of EPA supplementation and started challenging current thinking about the brain's biochemistry.

"In man's early days when our brains were still developing there was a lot more fish in our diet," the doctor explains. "The trouble today is that many things we eat, along with stress and nicotine, inhibit our own ability to produce it."

He first used EPA to treat a 21-year-old man who had suffered severe depression for seven years. Nine months after taking the supplement, he was cheerful, planning to study in the US and set up his own company. Comparing the young man's brain

### “The difference is incredible – my family and friends can't believe it”

For 20 years, severe chronic depression has played havoc with the life of Andrew, a photographer from Glasgow. He has spent weeks at a time in bed, unable to motivate himself to shave or wash. It was, he says, an effort just to survive and confesses that, at times, he had suicidal thoughts. Now 35, the depression he has suffered since he was 15 has robbed him of girlfriends and a fiancée who could not understand how debilitating the condition can be.

Andrew is now emerging from this long, dark tunnel thanks to reading Dr Puri's book and taking seven VegEPA capsules a day. “Unlike reactive depression there is no trigger,” he says. “After my ‘O’ Levels I just felt no one liked me and my sense of overwhelming depression got steadily worse and worse.”

His adoptive parents put it down to a teenage phase and it wasn't until he was 18 that he saw his GP, who told him he had a lovely family and nothing to

be depressed about. A year later he saw another doctor, who sent him to a psychiatrist who diagnosed severe chronic depression.

“I then began a journey through the whole artillery of anti-depressants,” he continues, “with all the horrible side effects, but still felt depressed. I was pleased to have a diagnosis, as I believe people thought I was making it up. They'd say, ‘Get a grip’, which makes you feel as bad as the depression does.”

The treatment did help him repeat his final school year, and pass his highers in Geography and English. He got an insurance job, but after six months the depression kicked in again. “I couldn't read or concentrate, not even on TV. My mind just filled with negative thoughts. I'd retreat to bed for weeks at a time. It was horrific for my parents.”

Andrew decided to study photography as it meant learning techniques, and did not involve book learning. He helped in a gallery and was later asked to teach photography to special

needs groups. A few years later he took his camera to India to compile a photo essay on sadhus, Indian holy men. “While I was there depression overwhelmed me again. The holy men looked after me, but eventually I had to come home. These bouts of severe depression are crippling.”

When he was well enough, Andrew went on holiday to the US and got a job with a picture framers in New York. “I got a flat and made a lot of friends, but gradually I could feel my anxiety levels creeping up, I struggled to get up in the morning for work. After a year, the depression was so bad I had to quit and come home and live with my parents. My self esteem plummeted.”

Then he joined *Scotland on Sunday* as a press photographer and was interviewed on radio about India. But the pressure of working for the national press meant his anxiety levels started to rise and he had to leave.

The turning point came in April when a friend gave him a copy of Dr Puri's

book. “I immediately went out to Boots and bought some EPA capsules. Four weeks later I didn't feel depressed. I still don't. It's a miracle. My family and friends can't believe it.

“The difference is incredible. I can catch myself feeling a wee bit happy, something I have not felt for years. My psychiatrist is bowled over by the change. I have bought my own flat with money I saved when I was in New York. I am reading so many books because I have so much catching up to do. I just hope the effect continues and I will still feel like this in a year's time.

“Personally I feel EPA should be the first line of treatment for anyone with chronic depression. In fact, it can benefit everyone. My mental faculties are sharper, my memory has improved, and I have a real zest for life again.”

scan with one taken before treatment, Dr Puri was amazed to see indications there had been regrowth. Brain imaging shows low levels of electrical activity in a depressed person's brain and a reduction in the grey matter – the cerebral cortex. The later scan showed that not only had his nerve cells regenerated but his grey matter had begun to thicken. “This led me to believe EPA can stimulate stem cells in the brain to produce new nerve cells, which offers hope for a variety of conditions,” he says.

The richest source of omega-3 fatty acid is oily fish – fresh salmon, tuna, mackerel, pilchards and sardines. But for the quantities of EPA needed, patients must take supplements. It is perfectly safe to take EPA supplements along with anti-depressants. But because of its blood thinning properties, people taking warfarin or having heparin injections should consult their GP first. “I don't advise people to come off anti-depressants immediately – if they stop

taking them suddenly they may suffer side effects,” says Dr Puri.

Of the high quality EPA supplements available, Dr Puri favours VegEPA because it has a higher ratio of EPA to DHA, another omega-3 fatty acid, and it has been found that a higher DHA content does not produce as effective a result.

For mild to moderate depression he advises a dose of two 280mg capsules, twice a day with food. Patients with severe depression need to see a specialist and take a higher dose, along with folic acid, zinc and selenium for at least three months. When the symptoms have disappeared, he advises patients to stay on a maintenance dose of at least two capsules a day.

“There are so many other benefits,” he adds. “Your skin starts to look younger, the condition of your hair improves and your nails get stronger.” Dr Puri practices what he preaches and takes four capsules a day, saying, “Maybe I'm just over cautious.”



#### Suggested EPA supplements

- eye q – available from Boots
- VegEPA – see website: ([www.vegepa.com](http://www.vegepa.com))
- Morepa and Maxepa.

#### Find out more

- *The Natural Way To Beat Depression* by Dr Basant Puri and Hilary Boyd, published by Hodder Mobius (£10.99, ISBN 0340824964).