Fish oil may fight psychiatric disorders

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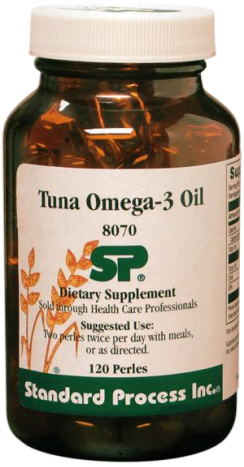

NEW YORK (Reuters) -- The consumption of omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids found in fish and fish oil may reduce the symptoms of a variety of psychiatric illnesses, including schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and depression, researchers report.

"Research suggests that (fatty acids) may have a role in psychiatric disorders," said Dr. Joseph Hibbeln of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland.

Hibbeln is one of a number of researchers attending an NIH-sponsored workshop on the issue in Bethesda this week.

The workshop was prompted in part by the results of three recent studies.

Findings from one study, conducted by Dr. Andrew Stoll of the Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts, suggest that fish oil supplementation could help alleviate the symptoms of bipolar (manic-depressive) disorder.

For a 4-month period, Stoll gave 14 bipolar patients daily supplements of either fish oil or a "dummy pill," or placebo. He found that "overall, 9 of 14 patients responded favorably to the addition of omega-3 fatty acids (to their diet), compared to only 3 of 16 patients receiving placebo."

Another study focused on the effects of one fish-oil fatty acid, eicosapentaenoic (EPA), in the treatment of schizophrenia. A 3-month trial conducted by Dr. Malcolm Peet of Northern General Hospital in Sheffield, England, concluded that "a 25% improvement (in schizophrenic symptoms) in the EPA treated group," compared with patients receiving either docosahexaenoic acid (DHA, another omega-3 fatty acid) or placebo.

A third study, conducted by Hibbeln, focused on levels of omega-3 fatty acids in the blood of 50 patients hospitalized after attempting suicide.

Hibbeln found that, among nondepressive (but not depressive) patients, high blood concentrations of EPA "predicted strikingly lower (better) scores in 6 different psychological rating scales which are related to suicidal risk." The NIH researcher says these findings suggest that "some subgroups of suicidal patients may reduce their suicidal risk with the consumption of EPA."

Hibbeln also noted that another study showed that dietary intake of EPA and DHA may influence serotonin function in the brain. "Such an alteration in serotinergic function may possibly reduce depressive, suicidal and violent behavior, but these changes have not yet been demonstrated in... clinical trials," he said in a statement.

Hibbeln explained that the brain's synaptic membranes, where much of the brain's neurological signaling takes place, "have a large proportion of essential fatty acids in them -- fatty acids which are derived entirely from the diet."

He points out that "in the last century, (Western) diets have radically changed and we eat grossly fewer omega-3 fatty acids now. We also know that rates of depression have radically increased by perhaps a hundred-fold" over the same period of time.

Links between fish consumption and neurological health may be supported by the results of global studies. According to Hibbeln, those findings suggest that "rates of major depression are markedly different across countries, depending upon how much fish is consumed in those countries."