

Anti-depressants may cause infertility in men

Men who take anti-depressants could be impairing their fertility, a new study claims.

By Richard Alleyne

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Scientists found that men who took the drugs suffered damage to the DNA of their sperm cells which could hinder them fathering children.

The research, carried out by Cornell Medical Center in New York, found that although the sperm appeared healthy, closer inspection showed the amount of DNA fragmentation more than doubled in men on the medication.

The findings, published in *New Scientist*, once again throw the spotlight on the most commonly prescribed anti-depressants known as selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs) that have also been linked to suicide in the past.

There were more than 16 million prescriptions for SSRIs in 2006, although there is no record on how many people used them or how many of the prescriptions went to men.

In the latest study, a team led by Peter Schlegel and Cigdem Tanrikut, gave 35 healthy men doses of paroxetine, a popular SSRI sold as Seroxat and Paxil, over five weeks and examined their sperm.

Superficially, the men's sperm seemed healthy – the amounts of sperm and semen, and the shape and motility of sperm, were all normal.

But when the team looked at DNA fragmentation in the sperm, they found the number of cells with damaged or broken DNA rose from 13.8 per cent to 30.3 per cent after just four weeks.

Similar levels of sperm DNA damage have been linked to fertility problems in couples undergoing IVF.

Studies have found that where the man has more sperm with damaged DNA, fewer embryos form and those that do are less likely to implant successfully into the woman's uterus.

Dr Schlegel's team will present its results in November at a meeting of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine in San Francisco, California.

The damage was considered "clinically significant" said Douglas Carrell, a specialist in male infertility at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

"I think a lot of us around the world have had data that have pointed in this direction and have been suspicious," he added.

SSRIs are known to slow the movement of sperm through the male reproductive system, an effect that has been exploited to help treat premature ejaculation.

Dr Schlegel believes that this extra time spent travelling from the testes causes sperm to accumulate DNA damage.

Dr. Allan Pacey, Senior Lecturer in Andrology at the University of Sheffield, said: "The apparent increase in sperm DNA damage is alarming, although the level at which we think the damage becomes clinically

significant is controversial to many scientists."

Seroxat has been taken by about 20 million people around the world since being licensed in 1990.

A GSK spokesman said: "Seroxat is approved for use in adults with depression, and a range of other psychiatric conditions, and has shown a clear clinical benefit for those patients.

"As this study was not conducted by GSK, we are currently reviewing the investigators' findings. These medicines remain an important option, in addition to counselling and lifestyle changes, for treatment of depression and this study should not be used to cause unnecessary concern for patients.

"Patients should discuss their situation with their doctor before stopping use of their medicine."

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