

**Question:** I read recently that antidepressants and lithium have been linked to Parkinson's disease. Do herbs pose the same danger?

**Answer:** The June, 2006 issue of the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry* carried an article on a study conducted in Copenhagen, Denmark. Strictly speaking, the study showed use of antidepressants or lithium was linked to an increased risk of future use of antiparkinson drugs. It did not show that antidepressants or lithium directly caused Parkinson's disease. Previous reports suggested a connection between anxiety and affective disorders (such as bipolar disorders) and Parkinson's disease. According to *Reuter's Health*, the authors of this new study say that it is possible that the *treatment* of anxiety and affective disorders precipitates Parkinson's disease.

I'm not aware of **any** studies linking the use of Chinese herbal formulas with Parkinson's disease. Remember, Chinese Medicine treats depression and anxiety from a very different point of view than Western Medicine. We commonly treat depression and anxiety with Acupuncture and herbs, but the treatments are usually not long-term treatments. Where someone might be on an antidepressant for many years (and some doctors have told their patients that they will take these medications for the rest of their lives), the course of treatment with Traditional Chinese Medicine would typically be on the order of 4-6 months. But really, even the long term use of Chinese formulas is very safe when properly prescribed by a qualified Acupuncture Physician.

While there are some formulas that you should not take long-term, there are many others that are perfectly safe for extended use. A commonly used formula for colds, called Yin Chiao, should not be taken for more than a week or two. It is draining in nature, and we say that it "clears heat." There are herbs in it which have antibiotic properties to them. It does not boost your immune system, but acts on the pathogen. On the other hand, Yu Ping Feng San has an herb in it which has been shown to improve immune response. This formula is frequently given to children who catch colds easily. It is mild in nature, and very safe. It can be taken by most people long-term with no adverse consequences. Some of the formulas used to treat depression can also be taken for months at a time, though it is unusual to need them for this purpose for more than a year.

Another study recently published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* showed that light therapy was as effective as Fluoxetine (Prozac) for patients with seasonal affective disorder (SAD). People with SAD tend to become depressed in the winter, with a decrease in exposure to sunlight due to shorter days. Considering the potential risk of short-term side-effects and the risk of long-term development of Parkinson's, wouldn't it be worth trying some form of alternative or complementary treatment, rather than simply taking a pill? At the very least, it's important to get out in the sun for at least 20 minutes a day, and get some exercise if you are prone to depression.

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