

Health Editor Sarah Stacey asks the experts for answers to your health queries

Q My 12-year-old son alternates between being withdrawn and sad, and occasionally rowdy and difficult. Our doctor thinks he may be depressed and has suggested medication, but I would prefer to try natural remedies.

A Childhood and teenage depression are becoming increasingly common, and children are starting to suffer at an early age, according to consultant physician Professor Basant K Puri of the Hammersmith Hospital, London. Some of the most likely signs of depression in young people, he says, are continuous low mood, irritability, not enjoying things, doing badly at school and not wanting to take part in school activities. Other pointers are sleeping badly, changes in weight, headaches and stomach aches that have no obvious cause, and loss of self-confidence.

A recent survey by Norwich Union Healthcare shows that many GPs feel that parents – unlike yourself – attempt to ‘bully’ doctors into prescribing antidepressants for their children. But this is not a good solution, according to Professor Puri. ‘The SSRI [selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor] group of antidepressants have shown little benefit and can cause adverse side effects in children and teenagers, including an increase in self-harming and suicidal thoughts. Most have now been banned from being used for under-18s,’ he says.

Professor David Healy, a consultant psychiatrist at Cardiff University College of Medicine, is concerned that some children who are just sad and anxious are labelled as depressed. ‘Lots of kids get unhappy occasionally because they’re having a hard time at school or there are problems at home. There is an increasing focus on pills for kids who are hard to handle, but what many doctors fail to realise is that simply asking the child what’s troubling them and listening to the response can be hugely powerful. It’s comforting for a child to talk with someone who seems to know how the world works.’

Helping children learn to handle their moods is enormously useful in the short and long term, says Professor Healy. ‘Everything you can do to help them get well without drugs is worth doing.’

Here are our experts’ suggestions:

- Depression is associated with changes in essential fatty acids in the brain, according to research by Professor Puri and scientists worldwide. He

recommends a combination of pure EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and virgin evening primrose oil (which supplies omega-6 fatty acids), as found in a supplement called VegEPA (Igenus, £11.95 for 60 capsules, from Victoria Health, victoriahealth.com, tel: 0800 3898 195). Dose: two a day for children up to 16, four for those over 16.

- Psychologist and nutritionist Patrick Holford of the Brain Bio Centre in London advises reducing sugar intake and taking a multivitamin that includes the vitamin B group (such as Children’s Multivitamins and Minerals by Nature’s Own, £7.50 for 50 tablets, suitable for children between four and 13). Visit foodforthebrain.org to see if your child may benefit from nutritional changes.

- The herb St John’s wort is used in mainland Europe, particularly Germany, to treat symptoms of mild to moderate juvenile depression. Pilot studies have given promising results, although clinical trials have not yet been done. (Try Kira St John’s Wort One-A-Day, £14.95 for 30, from Victoria Health. Check with your GP before giving to under-12s or if the patient is on any other drugs.)

- Daily exercise is vital, particularly when youngsters feel low.

- Research shows that pets provide children with comfort and a confidante, says Professor David

Servan-Schreiber, author and clinical professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.



LIFE SUPPORT

All our experts agree that children need unconditional love. The great Spanish cellist Pablo Casals once declared that it is vital to remind children how special they are. ‘Do you know who you are?’ he would ask a child. ‘You are unique. In all the world, there is no child exactly like you. Yes, you are a marvel.’

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Sarah reads all your e-mails but regrets that she cannot answer them all personally

Goodbooks

- *Optimum Nutrition for Your Child’s Mind* by Patrick Holford and Deborah Colson (Piatkus Books, £10.99)
- *The Natural Way to Beat Depression* by Professor Basant K Puri and Hilary Boyd (Hodder Mobius, £8.99)
- *Healing Without Freud or Prozac* by Dr David Servan-Schreiber (Rodale, £12.99)

To have any of these books delivered post-free, contact the YOU Bookshop, tel: 0870 162 5006, you-bookshop.co.uk

Thanks to our experts Professor Basant K Puri, Hammersmith Hospital, London; Professor David Healy, Cardiff University College of Medicine; Patrick Holford, the Brain Bio Centre, London; Professor David Servan-Schreiber, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine.