

Patch eases tremors of Parkinson's

A SKIN patch has proved effective in treating the symptoms of Parkinson's disease.

A study involving 277 people in Canada and the U.S. with early-stage Parkinson's assessed the Neupro patch, which is made by Germany's Schwarz Pharma and is already available in Britain.

It delivers the drug rotigotine, which acts in the same way as a brain chemical that has been found to be deficient in people with the disease.

Patients who wore the patch showed a significant easing of their symptoms after six months of treatment. Those receiving a placebo saw their symptoms get worse, the study by the University of Alabama found.

The patch is applied once a day and delivers rotigotine continuously through the skin.

Around 120,000 people in Britain have Parkinson's disease, an incurable condition that affects nerve cells in the area of the brain that controls muscle movement, and is characterised by a shortage of the brain chemical dopamine. Rotigotine imitates the effects of dopamine and helps make up for the shortage.

The disease's main symptoms are trembling in the hands, arms, legs, jaw and face, along with muscle rigidity, slowness of movement and impaired balance and co-ordination. The symptoms, which worsen over time, usually develop after the age of 60.

The study did not directly compare the patch to the current treatment of pills taken at least three times a day to treat symptoms.

Scan that can show you're drinking too much

A NEW five-minute scan can warn drinkers if they are in danger of developing serious liver disease. The breakthrough comes as rising numbers of people fall ill to liver disease, with widespread ignorance of the risks.

Until now, damage could be accurately tested only by sticking a biopsy needle into the liver through the stomach wall.

But this damages the liver — and, occasionally, can result in death — so it's not used for routine health screening.

But a new machine, which works using similar technology to ultrasound, is able to assess the degree of liver damage a drinker may be doing to themselves.

'The difficulty liver disease specialists have faced is finding a technology that can be used to pick up the early signs of a drinking problem and the effect on the liver,' says Dr Rajiv Jalan, who works at the London Clinic.

'We are now able to do this using a machine which is non-invasive, painless and risk-free to the patient.'

The Fibrosan uses sound waves to look for changes in the liver. It works on the principle that sound waves travel more slowly through a

soft, healthy liver than a hardened, damaged liver.

'This is an important addition to finding out what is happening with the liver and can be used to look at a number of diseases, including hepatitis and fatty liver disease,' says Dr Jalan.

'You don't need to be an alcoholic to start to show signs of changes to the liver.'

'Many people who appear to be well can show signs of early liver disease. Our concern is that it can creep up on you. Just eating out several times a week and drinking wine or beer at each meal could be enough to take you over the safe limits.'

The Fibrosan is able to pick up the changes in the liver in just a few minutes by the placing of a paddle on the body.

The device is similar to an ultrasound machine, which is used to monitor pregnancy.

An image of the liver can be seen on a screen and a computer connected to the sensor works out the degree



A lot of bottle: But at what hidden cost to your liver?

By **MARTYN HALLE**

of any liver damage by assessing how quickly the sound waves travel through the liver.

Blood tests for liver disease are not accurate enough to tell doctors what is going on, and are used only as an indicator that further investigations are needed.

Professor Roger Williams, who leads the London Clinic's liver unit and was George Best's consultant, is enthusiastic about the Fibrosan.

'In advanced cases of liver disease, you might still want to do a biopsy to get liver cells to examine in the lab, but the scanner can give you important information beforehand,' he says.

'People need to take stock because we won't just be treating the middle-aged and older people for alcoholic liver disease.'

Binge-drinking women seem most at risk of alcoholic liver cirrhosis.

In 1993, only 9 per cent of women aged 16 to 24 drank more than 21 units of alcohol a week, but this has leapt to 21 per cent.

It is recommended that women consume no more than two or three small alcoholic drinks a day. But

it's not all bad news, says Dr Jalan.

'The great thing about the liver is that it's very resilient and almost all damage to the this organ is reversible, before you reach cirrhosis.'

In cirrhosis, normal tissue is destroyed and replaced by fibrous scar tissue. This permanent damage prevents the liver from performing its normal functions.

Scarring of the liver can also be caused by a condition known as non-alcoholic fatty liver disease.

Around 2 to 4 per cent of the population is affected by this. Excess fat in liver cells can cause them to swell, which leads to inflammation and scarring.

Obesity and a lack of exercise are leading to a steady increase in the number of people being diagnosed with this form of cirrhosis.

'Some people might be suffering from an attack on their liver on two fronts, from too much drinking and excessive eating,' says Dr Jalan.

The Fibrosan is not yet in use in NHS hospitals. A scan costs £225.

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Gadget to beat skin infections

A NEW vibration device may have recovery time for sufferers of cellulitis, a skin condition that hospitalises 70,000 people a year. The condition is caused by bacteria that normally live on the skin's surface getting into the layer of fat and soft tissue underneath through a spot, cut or wound.

The lower leg is the most common area affected, and symptoms include redness and inflammation, warmth to the touch, pain and fever.

People with poorly controlled diabetes, eczema, psoriasis, severe acne, leg ulcers or poor immune systems may be at higher risk.

Research shows that when the new device is used three times a day on the lower leg, it can cut the recovery time of nine to ten days by 50 per cent. A trial on patients at Doncaster

Royal Infirmary showed it to be more effective when used with antibiotics than drugs alone.

'Preliminary results of the pilot trial indicate that using vibration by the device, in combination with antibiotics, for the treatment of lower limb cellulitis could significantly reduce treatment time and the oedema associated with the infection,' say the researchers. In the past, the infection has been treated with painkillers and oral antibiotics, but in many cases hospital treatment is needed, which involves antibiotics being put into a vein. In rare cases, cellulitis may cause blood poisoning.

The product is made by Sheffield-based Vibrant Medical and the clinical trial results show it can significantly speed up recovery. A pad underneath

the infected leg vibrates in a circular motion. The therapy improves blood circulation, which in turn speeds up the delivery of antibiotics. It is also said to reduce swelling.

'Each patient admitted to hospital with cellulitis takes nine to ten days to treat successfully. We can bring that down by half,' says the company's general manager, Philip Ehill.

The company says the technology can also be used for the treatment of leg ulcers. Used along with a standard compression bandage, it stimulates healing.

It can be used in hospital and at home by the patient, after instruction from a district nurse or carer.

■ **FOR more details, contact: 0114 224 2249; www.vibrant-medical.co.uk**

ROGER DOBSON