

# Pills show promise in delaying Parkinson's

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WASHINGTON — The government is preparing major studies of substances that offer the hope of slowing the progression of Parkinson's disease instead of just treating its symptoms. First on the list is an over-the-counter dietary supplement.

The National Institutes of Health is finalizing plans to enroll hundreds of early-stage Parkinson's patients in a study of super-high doses of coenzyme Q-10, or CoQ10, the agency's neurology chief announced Thursday.

Some scientists theorize that CoQ10, a compound made in the body, may help preserve the nerve cells that die off in Parkinson's.

An old antibiotic and a muscle-related supplement often used by bodybuilders are the next two candidates for a similar study.

Preliminary research released on Thursday suggests that they, too, just might offer a chance at slowing Parkinson's.

That is a tantalizing but elusive goal for the 1.5 million people in the United States and 6 million people worldwide who have Parkinson's.

The disease gradually destroys brain cells that produce dopamine, a chemical crucial for the cellular communication that controls muscle movement.

What results are increasingly severe tremors that, as one patient described Thursday, eventually feel like being "trapped in a washing machine on spin cycle."

Other symptoms are periodically stiff or frozen limbs, slow movement and impaired balance and coordination.

Standard treatments are to replace lost dopamine and insert a brain implant to control tremors. Both work for a while, but they do not fight the underlying cause of the disease.

The Holy Grail is a neuroprotector that could preserve patients' remaining dopamine-producing cells.

"We're looking for the aspirin of Parkinson's disease," said Dr. Diane Murphy, who oversees NIH's Parkinson's research.

An aspirin a day can lower people's risk of heart attacks.

"We don't have a drug like that right now and we don't know of such a drug," she said.

That's where the new research comes in.

CoQ10 is believed to help energy-supplying structures inside cells function properly and Parkinson's patients are thought to have reduced CoQ10 levels.

In one small study, a few dozen patients taking super-high doses showed less impairment over a year than did other patients given a dummy pill or low doses.

Some Parkinson's patients already try CoQ10 on their own, but the doses that scientists want

to test are "drug-like, much higher than over-the-counter doses," said Dr. Story Landis, head of the NIH's National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke.

Her agency is awaiting the Food and Drug Administration's final go-ahead to begin a Phase III clinical trial to prove if these high doses really protect.

Also under consideration are Minocycline, a prescription-only antibiotic that fights inflammation and is thought to play a role in Parkinson's; and the dietary supplement creatine, which is thought to boost the energy production of muscle-related cells.

Previous attempts to find neuroprotectors have failed miserably, said Dr. Karl Kieburtz of the University of Rochester.

Before pouring millions into these latest candidates, NIH hired Kieburtz to head a provocative pilot study — first trying to prove they are useless.

Fortunately, that is not what he found.

The study enrolled 200 patients in the earliest stages of the disease who took either minocycline, creatine or a dummy pill.

Over a year, those patients should have worsened noticeably, by 10 points on a scale commonly used to measure motor skills.

The minocycline and creatine users did not worsen that much, Kieburtz said Thursday at the World Parkinson Congress.

"I am certainly not advocating" trying the pills now, he said.

But they are leading candidates for NIH's next big neuroprotection trial, being planned now, Landis said.