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Researching the Benefits of Huperzia for Alzheimer's Disease

12-STATE CLINICAL TRIAL ANNOUNCED

Editorial Staff

Researchers from Georgetown University Medical Center have announced plans to perform a multi-site study to investigate the healing effects of huperzia, a type of moss commonly used in traditional Chinese medicine. The purpose of the study, which will be conducted at 23 locations in 12 states and the District of Columbia, is to determine the effectiveness of an ingredient found in huperzia in improving cognitive function in patients with Alzheimer's disease.

At the center of the study is huperzine A, a chemical derived from huperzia that prevents the breakdown of acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter. Because loss of acetylcholine function is a characteristic of several disorders of brain function, many scientists believe that huperzine A can be effective in stopping the spread of Alzheimer's disease. Other evidence has suggested huperzine A may protect brain tissue and improve memory in patients with age-related dementia.

In traditional Chinese medicine, huperzia has been used to treat not only Alzheimer's disease, but also conditions such as fever, blood loss and irregular menstruation. While dozens of Chinese studies have suggested huperzine A is both safe and effective, only a handful of controlled clinical trials assessing the herb's efficacy or toxicity have been published outside of China.

"This trial is essential to better understand the promise of huperzine A," said Dr. Paul Aisen, a professor of neurology at Georgetown and the trial's project director. "Based on studies in China, huperzine A may be more effective and better tolerated than currently prescribed drugs for

Alzheimer's disease. In addition, laboratory studies suggest that huperzine may have unique effects that could slow down the progression of the disease."

The huperzine trial will enroll approximately 150 individuals age 55 or older, all diagnosed with mild to moderate Alzheimer's disease, and for whom currently approved treatments for Alzheimer's have proved ineffective or intolerable. Upon enrollment, patients will be randomly assigned to one of three groups. The first group will receive a supplement containing 200 micrograms of huperzine twice per day; the second will receive a supplement containing 400 micrograms of huperzine twice per day; and the third group will receive a placebo.

The first portion of the trial will last 16 weeks. To measure the effectiveness of huperzine in treating Alzheimer's disease, subjects will take a battery of tests that assess memory, behavior, and other aspects of cognitive function at the end of the 16-week trial period, with results of the placebo group measured against each of the huperzine groups. Thereafter, patients in all three groups will have the opportunity to receive active huperzine supplements for up to an additional 24 weeks, with another set of cognitive tests conducted at the end of the 24-week period.

The trial is funded in part through a grant from the National Institutes of Health. Based on its results, the scientists will then determine whether to seek funding for a larger, definitive study.

A complete listing of sites participating in the huperzine trial appears below. Additional details can be found at the Georgetown Memory Disorders Program's Web site (http://memory.georgetown.edu). Practitioners interested in having their patients participate in the trial are encouraged to contact the program by phone at (202) 784-6674, or by e-mail at memory@georgetown.edu.

Sites Participating in the Georgetown Huperzine A Trial	
Site Contact Person	City/States Contact Information
University of Alabama-Birmingham Jo Ann Parrish	Birmingham, Ala. (205) 934-6223 jparrish@uab.edu
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Medical University of South Carolina Don Bagwell	North Charleston, S.C. (843) 740-1592, ext. 29 bagwelld@musc.edu

University of Texas-Southwestern Medical Center Kathleen Koch	Dallas, Texas (214) 648-7462 kathleen.koch@utsouthwestern.edu

References

1. 28-site trial studying Chinese herb as Alzheimer's treatment. Georgetown University Medical Center press release, April 26, 2006.
2. Georgetown University Memory Disorders Program (http://memory.georgetown.edu/treatment.html). Accessed June 7, 2006.
3. Correspondence with Paul Aisen, MD, June 8, 2006.

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