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### Health Alert: predicting anti-depression medication

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(Columbia) Sept. 30, 2002 - Ken Steckla believes he's been clinically depressed for 50 years, "Every day was a challenge just to get up. To me, it was like doing two shows a day, being on stage. And, at the end of the day, total exhaustion - just nothing left."

When he finally sought treatment, it took three months of trial and error to find the right drug. Doctors say that's not unusual; up to 40 percent of depressed patients spend months trying drug after drug before they find one that works.

Dr. Ian Cook of the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute says, "Everyone wishes we could get them on the right drug faster." A new test could help. The simple brain wave test has been shown to predict whether patients will respond to a drug before they actually do.

In a study at the University of California Los Angeles, 25 patients were given either Prozac or Effexor. In just 48 hours researchers noticed specific changes in the brain waves of patients who later responded to those drugs. They predict the test could save weeks or even months of expense, side effects and frustration.

Some people who actually thought they were taking the drugs were just taking a placebo, essentially a sugar pill. Thirty-eight percent of those people improved. Lead researcher Dr. Cook says that finding has led to an entirely new line of research to determine if it's the drugs that are actually working or just the idea of getting better, "What we found in our own data is that the placebo responders don't stay well for very long. Usually within a month or so they're coming back saying 'The depression's back. Can I start effective treatment now?'"

Anti-depressants actually work the first time around for 60 or 70 percent of those who take them. Others like Ken will continue to determine which drug is right based on whether it works.

The brain wave test takes only an hour, but it's not yet widely available. The World Health Organization estimates in 20 years depression will be one of the biggest strains on health care systems, second only to heart disease.

posted 11:32am by [Chris Rees](#)

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