

DURBAN

Mother and pharmacist Karen Norman knew fish oil supplementation was working for her then 15-year-old daughter when she came home excited because an accounting test had finally made sense to her.

Bridget Norman, now 19, had experienced problems at school since Grade 2 and when her mother started her on the supplement, called eye q, she saw it as an addition to the Ritalin her daughter had been taking on and off for years.

As a pharmacist, she heard about eye q shortly before its release in South Africa, and she said she saw results within two weeks.

In a world where parents are constantly bombarded with nightmare threats of Attention Deficit Disorder, dyslexia and dyspraxia, and in the ongoing debate over how best to help improve children's concentration and learning capacity, omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids have become watchwords.

But in the case of eye q, the claims of the manufacturer Equazen are actually backed up by solid research.

"I saw it as an extra, but it was really how it affected Bridget's maths and accounting that really impressed me.

"She was in Grade 9 at the time and I distinctly remember her coming home from school and raving about how an accounting test had finally made sense to her," Norman recalls.

But she has since recommended the product to customers, and one example is of a severely introverted child attending a school for learning disabled children.

"The mother didn't want to put her child on Ritalin so I suggested eye q as an alternative and she was just delighted.

"She said the response was amazing, that she could hardly stop her child talking," Norman says.

Another child with Tourette's Syndrome went on to eye q and it was his teacher that noted a marked improvement in his focus and his willingness to join in with the class.

Fatty acids, found in oily fish, green leafy vegetables, some nuts and seeds, as well as other food, help in the production of something called phospholipids, complex fat molecules that apparently can improve the brain's messaging system.

South Africa is unlikely to be any different, if not perhaps worse off, than the United Kingdom where the Food Standards Agency says that seven out of every 10 people don't eat fish at all, in spite of the well-publicised health benefits.

And the experts are almost unanimous in the advice that if parents are worried that their children are not getting adequate levels of these fatty acids from their diet, supplements should be considered.

The difference in Bridget may be easily explained in terms of eye q and the boost to her omega fatty acids; the key long chain fatty acids play an important role in maintaining optimal eye and brain function. And nearly a third of the tissues of the eye and brain are comprised of these long chain fatty acids which the body

manufactures from other essential fats, that can only be derived from an external dietary source.

So basically, if you have a deficiency in your diet of these “precursor” fatty acids, you won’t be able to create the specific fatty acids vital for optimum eye and brain function.

According to Equazen product manager in South Africa Sally Carstens, eye q contains a pharmaceutical-grade marine lipid specially selected because of its naturally-high level of active fatty acid, eicosapentaenic acid, or simply EPA. The oil is made from the flesh of sardines and pilchards farmed from seas known to have very low pollution levels.

But it’s not necessary to just take hers or anyone else’s word for it, because major studies have proved eye q’s efficacy beyond reasonable doubt.

Paediatrics, the official journal of the American Academy of Paediatrics, last year reported the findings of the Oxford-Durham study, a randomised, controlled trial of dietary supplementation with fatty acids in children with developmental coordination disorder.

The UK study reported that this disorder affected 5% of school-aged children there, and that other than the obvious consequences of deficits in motor function, the condition is also associated commonly with difficulties with learning, behaviour, and psycho-social adjustment that persists into adulthood.

The researchers pointed to mounting evidence suggesting that a relative lack of certain polyunsaturated fatty acids could contribute to related neuro-developmental and psychiatric disorders, such as dyslexia and ADHD.

This study took in 117 children, aged five to 12, and all with the disorder. The diets of one group were supplemented with eye q for three months, in parallel with the other group which got placebos, before a cross-over for the children on placebos who then went on to the active treatment for the following three months. The researchers saw “significant improvements” in those children on active treatment in terms of reading, spelling and behaviour.

After the children getting placebos were swapped to active treatment, similar changes were observed, while those already improving on active treatment from the start, either maintained their progress, or improved even further.

The manufacturers followed that up with the largest-ever classroom trial, this time in Middlesbrough, last year, which took in 270 children aged six to 11, from eight mainstream schools.

Again, the researchers saw “significant improvements”, and because this trial was run with mainstream rather than learning-disabled children, the significance was potentially greater, with relevance to all school-age children.

“The results are now in and they have exceeded my expectations, especially in children who were already functioning well above their age. For example, an eight-year-old child who was already reading at an age 13 level, was reading at an age 17 level three months into the trial,” reported lead researcher Dr Madeleine Portwood.

Mary Cobbold, head teacher of St Bernadette’s School from which 30 children took part, is reported to have expressed delight at the “accelerated improvements” they saw.

“Marked improvements in handwriting have been seen, as well as increases in reading age that surpass what we would normally expect within three months,” she said.

In South Africa, Heather Picton, vice-chairperson and founder of the ADHD Support Group of Southern Africa, is a great believer in the power of fatty acids, and points to nutrition guru Patrick Holford’s estimate that as many as 80% of people in the West have fatty acid deficiencies.

“If you look at the Western lifestyle, we don’t eat the precursors of fatty acids. And the little bit we do eat is cancelled out by all the junk food we consume,” she says.

Nineteen years ago, before eye q, she turned to the diet and fatty acids approach in respect of her own son.

“At age 14 I never thought he’d be able to get a Grade 8, but now he’s been accepted into the science faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand.

“I’d tried everything with my own hyperactive child, but when I found the answer he changed almost immediately. He was 14 and one week he was spelling mummy mumi, and the next week he could spell almost anything,” Picton recalls. She estimates that between 3% and 10% of all South African children are affected by ADHD, and believes that the best results come from a combination of fatty acids and elimination of flavourants and colourants from the child’s diet.

“Increase the fatty acid levels, and take the rubbish out of their food,” is Picton’s suggestion.

Norman says it makes sense that without our brain chemicals being in the correct ratio, we cannot hope to get the best out of our brains.

“We need to feed our brains correctly to get the best out of it, and we put a lot of rubbish into our bodies, with the problem compounded by the pollutants in the air we breathe every day,” she says

The company however does not necessarily see their product as a substitute for Ritalin, but rather as something to be used in combination where necessary.

“Our research shows that about 45% of children responded well to eye q, and of course not every child is ADHD, so it’s an option that parents can either use with existing treatment, or try as an alternative if they so choose.

“The results we hear about have been seen after quite short periods, but we say 12 weeks is the timeframe, and we’ve arrived at that through real measurable criteria that have been part of the studies,” she says.

Bridget Norman is 19 now and attends a professional cookery school, and still takes her eye q.

“We saw such positive improvements, in spite of her being on other medication too, so there’s no reason she should stop taking it,” her mother says simply. *eye q is available from all pharmacies and recommended health stores.

ends