

# Doctors put aloe vera to the medicine test; HEALTH: Natural remedy studied.(News)

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THE natural remedy aloe vera could soon be prescribed by GPs.

The cactus-like plant is being tested by gastroenterologists at Morriston Hospital, Swansea, to see if it can help patients with irritable bowel syndrome. It is believed to be the first trial of its kind in the UK and could herald the beginning of alternative medicines being prescribed alongside conventional treatment.

The director of the clinical research unit at Morriston, Kathie Wareham, said, "There is already some anecdotal evidence that aloe vera helps to alleviate the symptoms of IBS but we are now carrying out a full scientific study into its benefits.

"If it does prove successful it could be prescribed by doctors to treat the condition instead of just being available in the shops."

The year-long trial will involve 200 patients who have irritable bowel syndrome and have not responded to conventional treatments.

Dr Peter Atherton, a former GP who now runs his own alternative therapy clinic in England, was the doctor who approached the hospital with the idea and is confident that the trials will be a success.

"It took two years to get funding for the trial but eventually Prince Charles's Foundation agreed to donate the pounds 85,000 we needed, " he said.

"This trial is significant because it shows that doctors are beginning to respect that alternative medicines have something to offer."

Irritable bowel syndrome has been described as a condition of western living because it is often associated with stress.

Aloe vera, which in this case has been developed into a medicinal drink, is believed to help alleviate the pain and bloatedness that sufferers get with IBS and reduce the severity of attacks.

The cactus-like plant, which originated in Africa, is a member of the lily family and is related to the onion, asparagus and garlic.

It has been used as a medicinal herb for more than 4,000 years and is available in shops as a herbal remedy.

It is believed to be beneficial in soothing burns, healing wounds, screening out radiation and easing intestinal problems.

Dr Atherton said, "My colleagues used to look at me with cynicism when I used to say it worked, but they're not so cynical any more."

'Therapies need regulation'

WITH up to five million people a year consulting a therapist in complementary and alternative medicine, and many more asking their doctor for advice, the British Medical Association wants to see stricter regulation of the therapies.

Only osteopathy and chiropractic are currently regulated by law.

BMA Welsh secretary Dr Bob Broughton said, "The key to enhancing scientific credibility is through research into their safety and effectiveness.

"People want to know what works and what doesn't.

"It is sensible if the National Health Service is going to share treatment and management of patients with complementary and alternative medicine that there should be good information about therapies available for health-care workers and patients.

"The BMA believes only those therapies that are adequately regulated should be available on the NHS."