



Breakthrough on diabetic blindness

A PINE tree grown in South-West France could be the key to preventing one of the most common forms of blindness. Author Sue Townsend is perhaps the best-known sufferer of diabetic retinopathy, a complication of diabetes that causes bleeding into the retina and leads to up to 8,000 people a year losing their sight.

The condition develops when diabetics allow their blood sugar levels to creep too high, and it often goes undetected until damage to the eye has started. New research shows that Pycnogenol, an extract of French maritime pine bark grown in Gascony, can slow or even halt the bleeding that leads to the loss of sight. Among people who are insulin dependent, 90 per cent will develop diabetic retinopathy after a lifetime with diabetes. Among those with late-onset or type-two diabetes, 60 per cent are affected after 20 years.

'These sorts of levels are very disturbing when you think how devastating the loss of sight can be,' says Dr Frank Schonlau, of the University of Munster, who has studied the effects of diabetic retinopathy. 'You have to remember that once the damage is done to the back of the retina, which receives the messages that help us see, it cannot be reversed. So we need to find ways of preventing the damage in the first place and treatments that can slow or stop it.'

In a recent trial published in the journal *Phytotherapy Research*, more than half the patients taking Pycnogenol capsules had their retinopathy slowed or even halted by the supplement. Retinopathy starts with the fragile capillaries in the retina breaking down because of high glucose levels in the body.

Scientists have found that the pine bark extract is a powerful anti-oxidant which helps to seal and strengthen the fragile and leaky capillaries in the retina. It binds tightly to collagen and elastin in the blood cell walls, preventing them



New hope: Diabetic Jeremy Jennings

from bursting. Although the initial trials with Pycnogenol have been fairly small, there are now plans for larger trials to support the initial findings.

Jeremy Jennings, a 47-year-old car salesman from the Isle of Wight, has been taking Pycnogenol for six months since being diagnosed with diabetic retinopathy.

'It seems to have helped stabilise my vision since I've started taking it,' he says. 'My daughter, who is 21, was very worried when I got the diagnosis and found information about it on the internet. Then I bought some from the local health shop.'

Mr Jennings, who has been an insulin-dependent diabetic for 30 years, admits that his glucose levels have fluctuated over the years.

'I was quite surprised when I was diagnosed by the consultant, as I had no inkling that anything was wrong with my sight. He detected small amounts of bleeding on the retina which I'm hoping will not get any worse. I'm keeping my fingers crossed.'

MARTYN HALLE