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## Pill-popper nation: Prescriptions soar as we pick up more than 16 EACH every year

Britons pick up more than 16 prescriptions a year, says the Department of Health

Britain has become a nation of pill-poppers who turn to tablets to cure every ill, official figures show.

We each pick up more than 16 prescriptions a year on average, twice as many as 20 years ago, Department of Health data reveals.

This is despite people living longer and healthier lives than ever before.

With an ever-expanding range of over-the-counter painkillers also available, the true amount of pills taken could be far higher.

A profit-hungry pharmaceutical industry has been accused of inventing and exaggerating ailments and then blitzing doctors to boost sales.

Hyperactivity and high cholesterol are among the conditions that are said to have become increasingly medicalised.

Prescriptions for diet drugs are also soaring, creating concerns that medicines with dangerous side-effects are being used as quick fixes to problems that could be solved through a healthier lifestyle.

The NHS spent a staggering £22million a day on prescription drugs in England in 2006, a 60 per cent rise in real terms on a decade earlier.

Professor Joan Busfield, from Essex University, said that the age of stoicism was dead.

Instead, she said, Britain is becoming more like France, with its 'long-established tradition of taking medicines to heal problems'.

In her paper *A Pill For Every Ill*, published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine*, she accused the pharmaceutical industry of 'disease-mongering' and rewriting the medical dictionary.

Female sexual dysfunction, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and restless legs syndrome have been highlighted as problems that have been exaggerated in the name of profit.

More than 50million prescriptions were written for cholesterol-busting statins in 2008, an 80 per cent rise on just four years earlier.



And more than 10,000 prescriptions a week are written for anti-hyperactivity drugs, despite concerns they being used as 'chemical cosh' to calm boisterous youngsters who are causing havoc in the classroom.

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**Professor Steve Field said the drugs can help patients live longer**

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Children are also increasingly being given powerful slimming pills, with numbers increasing 15-fold in a decade.

Last month it emerged that the psychiatrist's 'Bible', the Diagnostics and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, could be revised to include a host of extravagantly titled 'conditions'.

These include cognitive tempo disorder, which has symptoms such as passiveness, dreaminess and sluggishness - and could easily be confused with laziness.

Also up for inclusion is intermittent explosive disorder - or adult tantrums.

Professor Busfield said drug firms aggressively court doctors by regularly sending sales reps to surgeries, sponsoring medical conferences and handing out cheap but eye-catching gifts such as branded pens and notepads.

'Companies claim such promotional activity is designed to inform practitioners about new, more effective products,' she said. 'And practitioners themselves, whilst recognising the blandishments of the industry, usually argue their prescribing is not influenced by industry's endeavours.

'However, the evidence indicates it is and that even small gifts can influence behaviour.'

Family doctors, said the professor, would often rather give patients pills than let them leave empty-handed, while medicine-savvy patients are increasingly requesting particular drugs.

'The population is getting healthier and healthier, longevity is increasing, but we are using more and more drugs,' Professor Busfield said.

She added that the pharmaceutical industry's contribution to the economy means that the Government is unwilling to rein it in.

She concluded: 'I would argue that the expansionary tendencies that have increased pharmaceutical use so extensively are unfortunate.

'This is not only because medicines are often very costly but also because the adverse reactions and side-effects are considerable and should not be risked if not fully justified by medical need.'

But Professor Steve Field, chairman of the Royal College of General Practitioners, pointed to other reasons for the rise in prescription drugs.

He said: 'Until the 1980s, for example, duodenal ulcers were treated by surgery.

'But the infection that causes it is now treated with drugs.

'Statins have reduced the number of heart attacks and led to patients living longer, healthier and more productive lives. So prescribing isn't such a bad thing.'

