

Lady Viagra?

The search continues....

In the 17 years since a little blue pill won FDA approval to give men a lift in the bedroom, not a single libido drug aimed at women has made it to market. So when, in June, an FDA advisory committee recommended approving a new female-desire drug called flibanserin, some women's organizations hailed it as a step toward sexual equality. But don't call it Viagra for women. Viagra targets blood vessels, increasing blood flow, which facilitates erection. Flibanserin, like some other drugs currently in the pipeline, targets the brain. Over time, the daily pill boosts dopamine and norepinephrine, neurotransmitters that are linked to sexual excitement, and lowers serotonin, which is linked to sexual inhibition. In one clinical trial, participants who took flibanserin had on average 2.5 more satisfying sexual encounters per month. Sounds promising—if you're not felled by the potential side effects of dizziness and nausea. But the crucial point to keep in mind is that flibanserin isn't intended for everyone. It's designed to help women with hypoactive sexual desire disorder—women with low to no sex drive.

Lauren Streicher, MD, an expert who testified in favor of the drug at the June FDA hearing, is nonetheless realistic about its limitations: "An awful lot of women are going to take this pill thinking it's going to help them, and it's not." Still, Streicher points out that its FDA approval—and the revenue it should generate—will almost certainly entice more drug companies to invest in research around women's sexuality. And that could be very exciting.

—KATE ROCKWOOD

