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Stay calm everyone, there's Prozac in the drinking water

It should make us happy, but environmentalists are deeply alarmed: Prozac, the anti-depression drug, is being taken in such large quantities that it can now be found in Britain's drinking water.

Environmentalists are calling for an urgent investigation into the revelations, describing the build-up of the antidepressant as 'hidden mass medication'. The Environment Agency has revealed that Prozac is building up both in river systems and groundwater used for drinking supplies.

The government's chief environment watchdog recently held a series of meetings with the pharmaceutical industry to discuss any repercussions for human health or the ecosystem.

The discovery raises fresh fears that GPs are overprescribing Prozac, Britain's antidepressant of choice. In the decade up to 2001, overall prescriptions of antidepressants rose from nine million to 24 million a year.

A recent report by the Environment Agency concluded Prozac could be potentially toxic in the water table and said the drug was a 'potential concern'.

However, the precise quantity of Prozac in the nation's water supplies remains unknown. The government's Drinking Water Inspectorate (DWI) said Prozac was likely to be found in a considerably 'watered down' form that was unlikely to pose a health risk.

Dr Andy Croxford, the Environment's Agency's policy manager for pesticides, told The Observer: 'We need to determine the effects of this low-level, almost continuous discharge.'

Norman Baker, the Liberal Democrat's environment spokesman, said the revelations exposed a failing by the government on an important public health issue. He added that the public should be told if they were inadvertently taking drugs like Prozac.

'This looks like a case of hidden mass medication upon the unsuspecting public,' Baker said. 'It is alarming that there is no monitoring of levels of Prozac and other pharmacy residues in our drinking water.'

Experts say that Prozac finds its way into rivers and water systems from treated sewage water. Some believe the drugs could affect their reproductive ability.

European studies have also expressed disquiet over the impact of pharmaceuticals building up in the environment, warning that an effect on wildlife and human health 'cannot be excluded'.

'It is extremely unlikely that there is a risk, as such drugs are excreted in very low concentrations,' a DWI spokesman said. 'Advanced treatment processes installed for pesticide removal are effective in removing drug residues,' he added.