

Memory loss may be slowed by trial drug

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An experimental drug may be able to slow the memory loss caused by Alzheimer's disease, pharmaceutical companies say, raising hopes of a breakthrough after decades of failure.

Experts gave a cautious welcome to a small trial which halted the onset of a protein that becomes "plaque" on the brain and affects memory. If the results are validated in larger studies, it would show that targeting this plaque is an effective way to treat Alzheimer's.

A drug to slow the progress of degenerative conditions would be worth an estimated £75 billion to whoever brings it to market.

Biogen, an American biotechnology firm, and Eisai, a Japanese pharmaceutical company, said that their drug, known by the codename BAN2401, slowed the progress of the beta amyloid protein when used in high doses and compared with a placebo.

A note of caution was sounded by experts due to the methodology used. Eisai used an in-house measure of efficacy rather than the industry standard and the study was designed to find the correct dosage for a later trial.

It has also been noted by analysts that the two companies announced in December that a trial using the same drug showed no clinical benefits after 12 months. The firms say they have since re-analysed the results using different methods.