

Alternative Treatments for Depression

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As the days grow shorter, many of us begin to feel the effects in the form of depressed mood, increased anxiety, decreased motivation, sluggishness, changes in appetite, sleep disturbances, etc. The following information may be beneficial for those seeking alternative treatments for these very common symptoms.

Although antidepressant medications have been very beneficial for a number of people suffering from depression and anxiety, anyone who has taken antidepressant medications can attest that there are often many unpleasant side effects. These include dry mouth, constipation, weight gain, decreased libido, dizziness, drowsiness, difficulty sleeping, etc. One antidepressant even advertises that a possible side effect is suicide!

Luckily there are several alternatives for the treatment of depression. The three substances most often studied and used are SAME, St. John's Wort, and 5-HTP. Additionally Light Therapy, Chinese Medicine, and Energy Medicine can be useful treatments.

Note: If you are not taking an antidepressant medication, or you would like to switch your medication, it is important to discuss these alternatives with your health care provider.

SAMe

Several recent studies have added to a body of evidence suggesting that the substance SAMe (S-Adenosyl-L-Methionine) is an effective antidepressant. It is a synthetic form of a compound formed naturally in the body from the essential amino acid methionine and adenosine triphosphate (ATP), the energy-producing compound found in all cells in the body. In the U.S. SAMe is available over-the-counter and in health food stores (we've even seen it at HyVee!).

A 2002 Italian study found SAMe to be as effective as imipramine, one of the original tricyclic antidepressants. The researchers also found that SAMe subjects reported fewer side-effects than subjects who took imipramine. This research and earlier studies are summarized in Medline. This particular study did not compare SAMe to placebo, though previous studies have found it to be superior to placebo.

Should you take it? That's a difficult question to answer, and the answer depends very much on your individual situation. If you are already taking an antidepressant you should not take SAMe. Little research has been done on how SAMe will interact with other medications. While SAMe appears to be an effective antidepressant, long term studies have not been done. SAMe does appear to hold promise as a natural substance that helps depression.

St. John's Wort

St. John's Wort is an herb that has been used for centuries for medicinal purposes, including the treatment of depression. The composition of St. John's Wort and how it might work are not well understood, although the active ingredients that produce the herb's effects are believed to be the compounds hypericin and hyperforin.

St. John's Wort has been used for centuries to treat mental disorders as well as nerve pain. In ancient times, doctors and herbalists wrote about its use as a sedative and treatment for malaria as well as a balm for wounds, burns, and insect bites. Today, St. John's Wort is used by some people to treat mild to moderate depression, anxiety, or sleep disorders.

There is some scientific evidence that St. John's Wort is useful for treating mild to moderate depression. However, recent studies suggest that St. John's Wort is of no benefit in treating major depression of moderate severity. More research is required to help us know whether St. John's Wort has value in treating other forms of depression.

St. John's Wort interacts with certain drugs by decreasing their effectiveness. Medications that may be affected by St. John's Wort include drugs used for the treatment of heart disease, HIV, certain cancers, depression, and seizures. There is also a danger of photosensitivity, so those taking this herb should be careful about getting too much sun (not a real problem during Iowa winters, though, is it?)

Additionally, blood type research has shown that individuals with type O blood have lower levels of the enzyme monoamine oxidase (MAO). Since St. John's Wort acts like an MAO inhibitor, a category of antidepressant medication, some individuals with type O blood may also experience feelings of spaciness and disorientation when taking St. John's Wort due to the ensuing low levels of MAO.

5-HTP

Chemically speaking, 5-HTP is a transitional compound produced when the body converts the amino acid Tryptophan into other compounds such as Serotonin and Melatonin. Both serotonin and melatonin have been shown to decrease depressive symptoms, and melatonin is often very helpful for regulation of sleep problems.

Some reports suggest that purity may be a potential problem for 5-HTP. In the September 1998 issue of the journal *Nature Medicine*, scientists at the Mayo Clinic reported finding low levels of impurities in retail samples of some dietary supplements containing 5-HTP. However, it's important to note that 5-HTP, in a pure form, is not a risk. Just be sure that you search for a product that assures purity of its ingredients.

5-HTP should not be used if you have the following medical conditions: Cardiovascular Diseases; Extremely Elderly Persons; those with Parkinson's Disease, Cancer or Autoimmune Diseases; Lung Diseases; Chronic Alcoholism; Liver diseases; parasitic infection; AIDS; Anorexia Nervosa; Low protein Diets; Severe allergies; Myalgia; Peripheral Neuropathy; Rash or Flushing; Edema; Nausea; Diarrhea; Sickle cell anemia; hemophilia; Pregnancy.

Light Therapy

Light therapy has shown success in people with seasonal affective disorder (SAD) who generally get depressed during the winter when there's less sunlight than at other times of year. Early findings have suggested the treatment might help people with non-seasonal depression as well.

Light therapy works by having the individual sit in front of a bright light unit, a specialized, portable box which houses balanced spectrum fluorescent tubes. An individual's need for light therapy specifies the duration of exposure and the optimal time of day for its usage. The light box provides a measured amount of balanced spectrum light equivalent to standing outdoors on a clear spring day. This has been shown to help regulate the body clock and to alleviate symptoms of depression.

The wonderful news is that there are no known side effects to light therapy and it has been shown to be beneficial for alleviation of depression during pregnancy when medications could be harmful.

Chinese Medicine

Chinese Medicine does not talk about depression in Western terms. The symptoms of depression are seen as an imbalance of the meridians in the body. Meridians are channels through which vital energy flows. They are close to the surface of the body and can be accessed using acupuncture needles or finger pressure. Certainly, anyone who has experienced depression has felt the sense of "stuckness" that goes along with it. In Chinese Medicine it is the pattern of stuckness that is treated through careful assessment and diagnosis of the meridian system of the body. It has been our experience that any and all meridians can be affected by depression. Acupuncture, along with Chinese herbs, are quite helpful in restoring balance to the flow of the meridians.

Energy Medicine

Another type of energy medicine (Reiki and Healing Touch) deals with a deeper layer of the energy field – the chakras. The chakras are seven centers of energy that are located deep to the spine from the top of the head to the tip of the tailbone. These centers guide the distribution of energy throughout the body. In my experience the chakras, particularly the lower ones, become congested and depleted during depression, blocking the flow of the life force within you. Additionally, in depression and anxiety there is often a sense that the chakras have lost their connection to each other and this needs to be restored. A session or two will demonstrate whether energy medicine of this type will be helpful for you.

There are many different and effective ways of alleviating the symptoms of depression. Sometimes medication is absolutely necessary but sometimes, it is not. Each individual will have to find out for themselves what is helpful, but I hope that this brief article has given you some ideas about natural and alternative methods that you might use to work

through the difficulties of this imbalance.