

Natural Treatments for Depression

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Over the past 50 years, depression has become one of the most common reasons for medical visits. During 2006 there were 902 million medical office visits and 27% of these were for depression. This is an extraordinary incidence of this often disabling condition. In this article I will focus on a few of the many treatment options.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, symptoms of depression may include the following:

- difficulty concentrating, remembering details, and making decisions
- fatigue and decreased energy
- feelings of guilt, worthlessness, and/or helplessness
- feelings of hopelessness and/or pessimism
- insomnia, early-morning wakefulness, or excessive sleeping
- irritability, restlessness
- loss of interest in activities or hobbies once pleasurable, including sex
- overeating or appetite loss
- persistent aches or pains, headaches, cramps, or digestive problems that do not ease even with treatment
- persistent sad, anxious, or "empty" feelings
- thoughts of suicide, suicide attempts

Conventional Medical Treatment

TV, internet and magazine advertisements are filled with an abundant variety of drugs for depression. Some urge you to “ask your doctor...” others give a list of possible side effects. None tell you the truth: that the drugs being recommended are only 10-15% more effective than the placebo in the drug trials. But that is the reality. In most drug trials, the placebo is effective in about 35% of the people while the drug being tested is effective in 45-50%. This is really not a high likelihood of benefit given the high frequency of side effects that one risks to get that 15% chance of benefit.

Like most drugs, antidepressants work by blocking natural biologic functions. In the SSRI group we are blocking the reuptake of serotonin making it look like the brain has more serotonin. Other antidepressants block other neurotransmitters (NTs) with the same purpose, making it look like the brain has more of the desired substance.

NTs are chemical messengers that brain cells use to communicate with each other. When they are deficient we feel depressed or anxious. We may be unable to let go of recurring thoughts. We lose a sense of purpose or desire for daily activities and no longer find joy in usually pleasurable activities. Appetite may increase causing weight gain, or may decrease causing weight loss.

NTs are obviously important but they are also complex. There are multiple types of receptors for each NT so when we use chemicals to block reuptake we get blockage of many receptors that were not malfunctioning and may get many undesired consequences, what we call “drug side effects.”

Functional Medicine

Sometimes considered Complementary or Alternative Medicine, Functional Medicine is based on the principle of using knowledge of the body’s biochemistry to help it do what it is trying to do. When the body’s chemistry is balanced we feel “normal” not drugged and we have no side effects.

There are just a few major NTs; serotonin, norepinephrin, dopamine, GABA and histamine. These are all small molecules that are made directly from specific protein units called amino acids. Tryptophan is converted to serotonin by a two step process that requires vitamin B6, magnesium and zinc. Tyrosine is converted to dopamine and then to norepinephrin. So it makes functional sense to use these amino acids and their cofactors to help the body repair its deficits rather than use drugs that mask them. Often nutrients that promote a process called methylation can promote healthier cellular communication. This is how SAME improves depression. A specially prepared form of highly concentrated Methyl B12 for self injection has been remarkably helpful in many refractory depressions. In fact some of the most severely depressed patients I have ever treated have responded fabulously to this simple treatment.

But not all depression is due to deficiency of NTs. NTs are substances that fit into specific receptor sites, like a key fitting into a lock that turns on cellular functions. Many depressions are due to damage to the receptor sites on cell membranes. Certain fish oils using a very high concentration of EPA compared to the amount of DHA has been effective for depression especially associated with **bipolar disorders**. Lithium orotate and lithium succinate are organic forms of lithium that are very helpful and have none of the side effects known to occur with the pharmaceutical lithium carbonate form of the mineral.

Special Considerations

Thyroid deficiency, or thyroid receptor damage, can create symptoms that are easily confused with depression. When the history and exam are supportive, a trial of thyroid hormone can be life changing.

Many **alcoholics** have learned that alcohol is the only way they are able to avoid their overwhelming depression. It turns out that for some people alcohol overcomes the block in production of GLA that is needed by the brain to produce a prostaglandin that has an antidepressant effect in the brain. In fact, alcoholics who supplement with evening primrose oil, the common source of GLA, had 83% long term remission compared to 23% of those who did not use the supplemental oil.

Over time, people undergoing **chronic stress** are at higher risk of developing depression. It is informative that stress produces higher levels of our stress hormone, cortisol. Cortisol interferes with the effect of most NTs in the brain. It should not be a surprise that stress reduction is an important part of any successful treatment for chronic depression. A healthy diet and daily exercise are often very helpful and along with sunshine, especially early in the morning have proven results in many patients.

We must also mention the role of **environmental toxicity** in the growing epidemic of depression. Toxic metals and chemicals interfere with production and function of NTs, cell membrane receptor sites, hormone production and function, etc. In many situations detoxification is necessary to regain health. In addition, especially in the elderly, impaired brain circulation can mimic depression and various ways to improve circulation can be very helpful.

Final Comment

If you or a loved one suffers from chronic or recurrent depression, do not stop medications or try to self treat. Seek the advice of a professional who understands the medication(s) you are using and can guide you through the complex paths to full and safe recovery and help you with long term plans to avoid recurrences.