

Pharmaceutical antidepressants are designed to alter the body's biochemistry, for example to increase levels of neurotransmitters such as serotonin that helps keep us happy, or adrenalin/noradrenalin that helps keep us motivated. But brain health and neurotransmitter production can also be improved in other ways. A herbalist can prescribe a mixture of herbs from a wide range of plants that are known to improve mood and lift depression, sometimes permanently by correcting a hormonal imbalance or improving liver function. Such a prescription will work best if care is taken with the diet.

### 1. Balance your blood sugar.

There is a direct link between mood and blood sugar balance. The brain runs on glucose and the more uneven the blood sugar supply the more uneven the mood. For balanced blood sugar levels, avoid sugary foods and refined carbohydrates such as white rice, white bread and processed breakfast cereals. Eat whole foods such as whole grains (especially oats), lentils, nuts, seeds, fresh fruit and vegetables and combine protein with carbohydrates, for example, fish with pasta, or nuts and seeds with cereal or fruit. In addition cut right back on stimulants such as tea, coffee, chocolate and cigarettes. These increase the levels of the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol, which in turn increase blood sugar levels.

### 2. Chromium.

Chromium is vital for keeping blood sugar levels stable because insulin can't work properly without it. Chromium is highly effective in relieving the kind of depression which is accompanied by sugar cravings, weight-gain and feeling tired all the time. Taking proper levels of chromium can make a big difference to certain depressed people.

### 3. Omega-3 oils.

The higher the blood level of omega-3 fats, the higher the levels of serotonin are likely to be. This may be because omega 3s help to build the brain's neuronal connections and the receptor sites for neurotransmitters; therefore, the more omega 3s in your blood, the more serotonin you are likely to make and the more responsive you become to its effects. A recent trial by Jazayeri et al published in the Australian and New Journal of Psychiatry (March 2008) showed EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) to be slightly more effective than the anti-depressant fluoxetine. The richest dietary source of omega 3 fats is from carnivorous cold water fish, such as salmon, mackerel and herring. The best seeds are flax and pumpkin seeds. When supplementing omega 3 fish oils aim for about 1000 mg of EPA a day; that is a 500mg Omega 3 Fish Oil capsule once or twice a day and a serving of fish three times a week.

### 4. B vitamins.

People with either low blood levels of the B-vitamin folic acid, or high blood levels of the protein homocysteine, (a sign that you are not getting enough B6, B12 or folic acid) are both more likely to be depressed and less likely to get a positive result from anti-depressant drugs. Eat foods rich in these nutrients such as whole foods, fruit, vegetables, seeds and nuts.

### 5. Tryptophan

Serotonin is made in the body and brain from an amino acid 5-Hydroxy Tryptophan (5-HTP), which in turn is made from another amino acid called tryptophan which is found in the diet in many protein rich foods such as meat, fish, beans and eggs. The richest source of 5-HTP is the African Griffonia bean. Just not getting enough tryptophan is likely to make you depressed so consider supplementing it if you are not getting enough in your diet. 27 studies have shown conclusively that 5-HTP is effective in treating depression. However do not take 5-HTP without your doctor's permission if you are currently taking anti-depressant tablets.

To find out more about how to improve your mood, memory and solving mental health problems read New Optimum Nutrition for the Mind.