

# Supplements and Medications *for Depression*

By Cheryl Yanuck, MD

**M**ajor depression is an illness that is usually caused by a combination of biological and environmental factors. Psychotherapy and stress management are useful tools for addressing the environmental components of depression.

Physical exercise is one effective biologically-based tool for combating depression. Another biological means of fighting depression is with antidepressant medications. The number of antidepressants available has increased dramatically in the last 20 years. When I began medical training, we had only the tricyclic antidepressants (e.g., amitriptyline, imipramine, nortriptyline, desipramine) and the monoamine oxidase inhibitors (e.g., tranylcypromine, phenylzine). Then, in December of 1987, Prozac entered the market and revolutionized mental health treatment. As the first widely used selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), it was safer and easier to take than the old drugs. Other SSRIs followed: Zoloft, Paxil, Celexa, Lexapro. Wellbutrin came on the market in the late 1980s as the first selective norepinephrine and dopamine reuptake inhibitor. The hybrid serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (Effexor and Cymbalta) have also proved to be very useful. Other medication strategies can also be employed, depending on the patient's individual needs.

Non-prescription supplements are sometimes used to treat depression or to augment the effect of medication. The body requires certain nutrients to produce the neurotransmitters that regulate our moods. B vitamins (e.g., B6, B12, folic acid) and minerals like magnesium are essential to our mental well-being. Some people have a reduced ability to convert folic acid to its biologically active form, folinic acid. Some medicines (e.g. certain anticonvulsants) block the conversion of folic to folinic acid. These people would need to take a folinic acid supplement to get benefit. Omega-3 fatty acids found in fish and flax seed oil have been shown to improve mood in depression and bipolar disorder, as well as re-

ducing the risk of heart disease. We can get all of these nutrients in our diets if we eat unprocessed healthy foods, but the typical American diet can be lacking in nutrients. And to get enough Omega-3s you'd need to eat a lot of fish or flax seeds every day! So, often it helps to take supplements.

Vitamin D deficiency can lead to seasonal depression, as well as other health problems like osteoporosis and increased risk of heart disease and cancer. I am amazed at how many people are deficient in vitamin D when we check their blood level. This is likely because vitamin D is produced in the skin with exposure to sunlight, and we spend much less time soaking up the sun's rays than in the past, due to lifestyle changes and fear of skin cancer.

Amino acids, the building blocks of proteins, are also required to make neurotransmitters. The biochemical precursors (building blocks) of serotonin are L-tryptophan and 5-hydroxytryptophan (5HTP). Either of these can be taken as an over-the-counter supplement. They should only be combined with a serotonergic drug under medical supervision, as too much serotonin can be dangerous. But sometimes adding a little tryptophan or 5HTP can reactivate an SSRI that has "pooped out" after several years. Similarly, L-tyrosine is the amino acid precursor of dopamine and norepinephrine. By increasing the level of these stimulating neurotransmitters, tyrosine can help with mood, energy, and motivation level. But high doses of tyrosine may promote growth of malignant melanoma skin cancers, so discuss this with your doctor before you try it.

St. John's Wort is an herb that is widely used in Europe to treat depression. It has been shown to be effective for mild to moderate depression in most studies. Caution: St. John's Wort can make you more sensitive to the sun, and it can lower some drug levels such as birth control pills, rendering them ineffective! Herbal and nutritional remedies can be quite useful, but it is important to do your homework before you take any pill, prescription or otherwise. **h&h**



*Cheryl H. Yanuck, M.D., is a psychiatrist who has practiced in Chapel Hill since 1992. She specializes in treating adults with mood and anxiety disorders, eating disorders, relationship and self esteem problems, and in teaching stress management. She provides both psychotherapy and medication management as indicated.*

To contact Dr. Yanuck:  
**CHERYL YANUCK, MD**  
101-B Cloister Court  
Chapel Hill, NC 27514  
Telephone: (919) 493-0406  
[www.CherylYanuck.com](http://www.CherylYanuck.com)