



Blues busters

Six natural remedies that can help prevent and ease depression



The statistics are, well, depressing: Nearly 14.8 million American adults experience the crushing emotional and physical symptoms of depression, and a majority of those who are diagnosed are women.

The reasons so many of us feel so sad at some point in our lives vary—biological imbalances, stress, genetics, nutrition deficits, not enough sleep and even situational triggers can all be blamed. But experts agree there is one physiologic constant that's found in those of us who get a bad case of the blues, says David Leavitt, M.D., an integrative psychiatrist at Michigan Integrative Psychiatry in Ann Arbor: The body stops producing (or effectively using) the brain chemicals that regulate mood.

One brain chemical in particular, serotonin, is a neurotransmitter that's a key regulator of emotion, behavior and mood. It serves as a messenger, jumping between neurons. When not enough serotonin makes the leap, it can result in feelings of depression. Traditional M.D.s often prescribe antidepressants—Prozac, Zoloft and Paxil being the most popular—which work by helping your body make the most of the serotonin that's already available in your brain. The upside for many is a brighter outlook, but common

side effects—including insomnia, weight gain, headache and nervousness—aren't fun. In contrast, natural remedies not only support the serotonin you already have, but help your body create more of it—with fewer nasty side effects.

But be careful, says Amy Bader, N.D., an adjunct clinical faculty member at the National College of Natural Medicine in Portland, Ore. "Before you start stocking up on herbs that have druglike effects, know that even natural remedies can interact negatively with antidepressants," she says. So make sure your doctor is involved before starting, or changing, your treatment plan. Once you get your doctor's green light, consider the following research-proven remedies.

Fish oil

The abundant stores of omega-3s in fish oil help your body make better use of the serotonin it already has. Studies confirm that fish oil helps treat depression, especially postpartum depression. "During pregnancy, the mother's brain has to give up omega-3s so the baby's brain can develop, which can result in a deficiency," says Leavitt. Women need to think about supplementing with fish oil during and after pregnancy, in order to maintain healthy amounts of omega-3s. (Contraindication: If you're taking heart medications, such as blood thinners, fish oil can interfere with their effectiveness.)

How to use: Take 2,000 milligrams of combined EPA and DHA fish oil per day.

SAM-e

S-adenosylmethionine (more commonly known as SAM-e) supports the production of serotonin, says Levitt. According to a study from Harvard University published in the August 2010 *American Journal of Psychiatry*, SAM-e may work as well as, in addition to enhancing the effects of, conventional medications in treating major depressive disorder. It's important to note, however, that it is energizing and may increase feelings of anxiety in some people.

How to use: Start at 400 milligrams, building to 1,200 or 1,600 milligrams per day in the morning, says Leavitt. (If taken late in the day, SAM-e may interfere with sleep.) Take the same dose for at least a week before adding more; stop increasing the dose if side effects occur.

St. John's wort

By helping your body make better use of the serotonin it already produces,

* mood lifters

Our top picks to naturally banish bad feelings



Fish oil

Nordic Naturals Ultimate Omega, \$28, mynaturalmarket.com



SAM-e

Nature Made SAM-e Complete, \$40, walgreens.com



St. John's wort

Kira St. John's Wort, \$11, vitaminshoppe.com



B vitamins

Source Naturals Coenzymate B Complex, \$11, vitaminanswer.com



Vitamin D₃

Now Foods Vitamin D₃ High Potency, \$8, luckyvitamin.com



Magnesium

Peter Gillham's Natural Vitality Natural Calm, \$23, mynaturalmarket.com

St. John's wort has been shown to be as successful as conventional antidepressants in the short-term treatment of mild to moderate depression. But it can interact negatively with antidepressants and interfere with the effectiveness of other drugs, such as birth-control pills, says Leavitt. It can also trigger several side effects, including light sensitivity, nausea and headache. **How to use:** Dosages vary depending on the brand, but if you try our pick, Leavitt suggests taking one 300-milligram tablet, three times a day, at mealtimes.

B vitamins

B vitamins, such as thiamine (B₁), B₆, B₁₂ and folate (B₉), encourage the production of neurotransmitters, such as serotonin. A deficiency in B vitamins can trigger or worsen depression. And because B vitamins are water-soluble, your body quickly uses and eliminates them. So it's smart to replace them on a daily basis, explains Bader.

How to use: Take two sublingual tablets per day dissolved under the tongue.

Vitamin D₃

While the link between vitamin D and depression is not clear, studies have shown that the body produces more serotonin after being in the stronger rays of the summer sun versus winter sunlight, says Bader. Supplementing with vitamin D₃, a form of D that is closest to what's created naturally in the body, may enhance serotonin levels. It's especially important to check your vitamin D levels if you have darker skin or get minimal sun exposure.

How to use: Take 2,000 to 5,000 IUs of vitamin D₃ daily. Taking 10,000 IUs or more of vitamin D daily can be toxic.

Magnesium

Magnesium helps your body create the serotonin it needs for you to stay in a positive mood. It also encourages the serotonin that's already there to work more efficiently. While not a proven treatment for depression, supplementing with magnesium can elevate your mood, relieve stress and help you sleep, says Leavitt. But it can create loose stools—so take less if you experience difficulties.

How to use: Start with a half teaspoon daily of a powdered formula and gradually increase to two teaspoons (about 325 to 350 milligrams) per day. ✖

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