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Sleepless in Seattle... or anywhere else?

5-HTP offers a solution for slumber

Melina Roberts, ND

Are you chronically tired?
Are you having trouble
getting through the day?
The problem may be that
you're sleep-deprived.

A good night's sleep is vital to overall long-term health. If a person's sleep is chronically disrupted, this can lead to a cascade of other health problems.

It is during our sleeping hours that our liver is actively detoxifying, our lymphatic system is cleansing, our tissues are regenerating, muscle is being built, fat is being broken down, and major healing is occurring. Sleep is also an antioxidant for the brain,

when free radicals are removed from circulation. One of the ways to support the healing process is to get a good night's sleep.

Serotonin and sleep

In our body, the proteins we eat are broken down to amino acids. One specific amino acid, tryptophan, is converted to a naturally occurring amino acid, 5-HTP. This amino acid is delivered to the brain and converted to the neurotransmitter serotonin, as well as to other brain chemicals including melatonin, endorphins, dopamine, and norepinephrine.

Serotonin is an important neurotransmitter involved in brain activity responsible for emotions, appetite,

and sleep-wake cycles. Many common lifestyle factors including chronic stress, poor diet, insufficient digestion, and toxic buildup have contributed to low serotonin levels in the brain. Insomnia and other sleep problems are often associated with low serotonin levels, which is why 5-HTP has been shown to be effective for enhancing proper sleep.

5-HTP to serotonin

Research has shown that oral supplementation of 5-HTP has the ability to increase sleep quality by increasing REM (rapid eye movement) sleep and deep sleep in stages 3 and 4 without increasing total sleep time. Natural supplements such as 5-HTP, unlike

prescription sleeping pills, do not alter natural sleep stages, impair performance, or alter brain electrical activity during sleep.

Tryptophan can also be taken orally but is used by the body for many other functions; at best, only 3 percent of an oral dose of L-tryptophan is converted to serotonin in the brain. Alternatively, 70 percent of a dosage of 5-HTP is delivered to the bloodstream and can be converted to serotonin, making 5-HTP the more effective choice.

There are a number of other conditions associated with low serotonin levels including depression, anxiety, headaches, and fibromyalgia. This means that 5-HTP is able to help with more than just sleep.

Research for 5-HTP

Depression A double-blind study in Switzerland compared 5-HTP to a commonly prescribed selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) used to treat depression. Use of 5-HTP was shown to be quicker acting in relieving the symptoms of depression and improving quality of sleep, while the SSRI greatly disrupted sleeping patterns.

5-HTP is believed to work by regulating and improving brain chemistry. Taking 5-HTP for depression is advantageous in terms of its overall effectiveness; it is better tolerated than synthetic drugs, with fewer side effects and less toxicity to the body.

Fibromyalgia The severity of pain that people experience with fibromyalgia correlates with quality of sleep. Individuals with fibromyalgia who use 5-HTP experience improved sleep cycles as a result of increased serotonin levels in the brain. Because 5-HTP also has the ability to increase endorphin levels,

our natural painkiller, it may also be useful for the chronic pain associated with fibromyalgia. The benefits of 5-HTP for people with fibromyalgia lie in its ability to address the low serotonin levels and promote a good night's sleep, thereby breaking the cycle of pain.

Though 5-HTP has many beneficial qualities, it is important to note that there may be side effects and potential interactions with medications such as antidepressants. It is important to consult with a licensed health care practitioner before taking 5-HTP. **a**

Melina Roberts, ND, practises in Ajax and Markham, Ontario. Her clinical focus includes chronic disease, digestive disorders, women's health, and cancer. melinaroberts.com

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