

Complementary Therapies for Depression

Clinical depression affects over 17 million Americans every year, and overall 28 million Americans take antidepressant medications. While modern psychiatry focuses on manipulating chemical (neurotransmitter) levels in the brain, the underlying cause should be sought and corrected whenever possible. To this end, patients need a thorough medical evaluation before starting on therapy. This evaluation should consider contributing factors such as nutritional deficiency or excess, drugs (prescription and otherwise), low blood sugar, hormonal imbalances (testosterone, thyroid, adrenal),^{1, 2} environmental factors (e.g. heavy metal toxicity), sleep disturbances, and food allergies.³ An attempt should be made to correct any abnormalities that may be contributing or causing depression. Although conventional medicine relies on psychological counseling and antidepressant prescription drugs, scientific research supports the use of the following complementary therapies:

- I. Vitamins and Supplements
 - A. Vitamin B12 and Folate –
Patients with Vitamin B12 deficiency are depressed twice as often as nondeficient individuals.⁴ Vitamin B12 deficiency is quite common, especially among the elderly.⁵ Taking a high potency multivitamin (which contains thiamine [vitamin B1], vitamin B6,⁶ folate^{7, 8}, inositol,⁹ magnesium,¹⁰ and vitamin B12), or IM injection of folate and vitamin B12 may improve depression in individuals who are deficient in these essential vitamins. A dosage of 800mcg. of folic acid and 800mcg. Of vitamin B12 should prevent deficiencies in most individuals.¹¹
- II. Exercise
 - A. Regular exercise improves depression.^{12, 13} Exercise also improves sleep, which improves mood disorders.¹⁴
- III. Environmental Issues
 - A. Toxic chemical exposure –
Exposure to toxic chemicals can induce psychiatric illness.¹⁵ More than 9 million workers are exposed to solvents in the workplace. Improving ventilation or changing jobs may improve depression in affected individuals. Pesticide exposure can also cause cognitive deficits.¹⁶
 - B. Seasonal Affective Disorder-
Light therapy can improve both seasonal and non-seasonal depression in up to 35% of individuals. Therapy consists of 2-3 hours of 2,000 to 3,000 lux daily.¹⁷
- IV. Supplements
 - A. St John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*)-
Supplementing with St John's wort may improve symptoms in patients with mild to moderate depression.¹⁸ St John's wort is available in a variety of preparations. For mild to moderate depression, the standard dose of a solid (dry-powdered) extract (0.3% hypericin) is 300 mg. three times daily.¹⁹ **(NOTE: St. John's wort should not be taken in addition to other antidepressant medications and it can interfere with the**

absorption and utilization of other medications.²⁰ Therefore, before taking St. John's wort, check with your pharmacist or doctor.)

- V. Diet
 - A. Essential Fatty Acids –
Deficiencies in omega –3 essential fatty acids (EPA and DHA found in fish oil) and an imbalance in omega –6 to omega – 3 essential fatty acid ratio can cause depression.²¹ Taking fish oil supplements, eating fish, and reducing the amount of saturated meat fat, dairy fat, and fat in processed food can improve depression.²²
 - B. Gluten (Wheat) sensitivity-
Sensitivity to wheat can cause depression; avoidance of wheat in the diet can improve depression.²³ Scientists theorize that antibiotics against gluten may be directly or indirectly neurotoxic. A simple blood test can test for *antigliadin antibodies*.
 - C. Aspartame-
Aspartame (Brand name Nutrasweet) can cause or provoke mood disorders in susceptible individuals.²⁴ Try eliminating aspartame from the diet.
 - D. Caffeine-
Caffeine affects the central nervous system and affects serotonin metabolism. Abstinence improves psychological functioning and depression in some patients.²⁵
 - E. Monosodium glutamate (MSG) –
MSG can cause a variety of adverse reactions including depression in susceptible individuals. MSG is often hidden as “natural flavoring(s)”.²⁶
 - F. Food Allergies
Food allergies can cause depression. Eliminating problematic foods can improve mood disorders.²⁷ Eliminate the following common food allergens: Dairy products, wheat, corn, eggs, citrus fruits, coffee, tea, alcohol, refined sugar, food additives, and any other food you eat more than three times a week. After three weeks reintroduce restricted food items one at a time. If symptoms reoccur or worsen with reintroduction of a particular food item, eliminate it from the diet.
 - G. Malnutrition
Malnutrition, which is common among elderly institutionalized individuals, can cause or contribute to depression.²⁸
- VI. Prescription Drugs
 - A. Eliminating drugs that cause depression can improve mood disorders.^{29, 30}
Cholesterol-lowering drugs can cause depression in older individuals.³¹
- VII. Acupuncture
Traditional Chinese Medicine can help patients with depression.³²
- VIII. Meditation
Meditation can improve a variety of mood disorders including depression.³³

Most of the following citations were obtained from *Clinical Pearls Database* 1989-2001, 3301 Alta Arden, Suite 2, Sacramento, CA, 95825

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