

# The Medical Letter®

## On Drugs and Therapeutics

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## IN BRIEF

### 5-HTP for Depression

A Medical Letter reader asked about the use of the nutritional supplement 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) for treatment of depression. It is sold in health food stores, pharmacies and on-line for many indications including depression, mood enhancement, emotional well being, and promotion of normal sleep.

5-HTP is the intermediate metabolite in the biosynthesis of serotonin from L-tryptophan.<sup>1</sup> Many small studies in the 1970's and 1980's found 5-HTP helpful in the treatment of depression, but a Cochrane Review of 108 studies in patients with depression or dysthymia using 5-HTP or L-tryptophan found that the quality of the data was insufficient to establish the efficacy or safety of these products.<sup>2</sup>

In 1989, contaminated L-tryptophan supplements were implicated as the causative agent in an outbreak of eosinophilia-myalgia syndrome (EMS), which was associated with some deaths. There is no evidence that 5-HTP could cause the syndrome.

There is no acceptable evidence that 5-HTP or L-tryptophan offers any advantage over a selective-serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) for treatment of depression. Taking 5-HTP or L-tryptophan in addition to an SSRI could cause serotonin syndrome.

There is no good reason to take 5-HTP or L-tryptophan.

1. N Iovieno et al. Second-tier natural antidepressants: review and critique. *J Affect Disord* 2010; 130:343.
2. K Shaw et al. Tryptophan and 5-hydroxytryptophan for depression. *Cochrane Database Syst Rev* 2002; (1): CD003198.

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