

Tryptophan— Your Ticket to Slumberland

by Daniel Jacobs

DOCTORS BEGAN prescribing tryptophan as a sleeping aid in the late 1970s, and it was available for purchase at most health food stores at the time, too. Over the following 10 years, millions of Americans would safely use it to relieve their insomnia. Unfortunately in 1989, one of the largest nutritional supplement distributors, Showa Denko, produced an adulterated batch of tryptophan. It sickened thousands, essentially invoking a 13-year FDA ban on the sale of tryptophan—despite overwhelming evidence that Showa Denko, not tryptophan, was at fault.

Since tryptophan was reintroduced to the American market in 2001, it has slowly regained consumer confidence. At first, manufacturers had hesitated to produce it, citing the (albeit unwarranted) bad press it received more than a decade ago. But now that consumer interest in tryptophan from trusted brands, such as FTH Nutraceuticals, is burgeoning, more and more people are hopping on board the tryptophan bus...especially those who suffer from insomnia or other sleep irregularities.

INSOMNIA & SLEEP DEPRIVATION

Over 35 million Americans suffer from chronic insomnia, and 58 percent of us suffer from symptoms of insomnia at least once a week. To give these numbers perspective, there is a better chance you suffered from symptoms of insomnia last year than that you voted in the presidential election.

Insomnia has reached epidemic proportions in America. And it only stands to get worse.

Americans continue to work harder, drink more caffeine, and worry more than ever before. (If that isn't a prescription for less sleep, I don't know what is!)

But it doesn't have to be an epidemic forever. We all have the potential for a good night's sleep—and we don't need addictive pharmaceuticals to do it for us!

THE SEROTONIN-MELATONIN CONNECTION

Excluding environmental factors and genetic predispositions*, insomnia often accompanies one or more of these symptoms: depression, irritability, fatigue, impatience, stress, anxiety, medication side effects, changes in sleeping patterns, or jet lag. These symptoms often mean your body is suffering from serotonin and/or melatonin deficiency.

Serotonin and melatonin are neurotransmitters located in the brain's pineal gland. They are critical elements of any good night's sleep. If production of either isn't properly regulated, sleep can be compromised.

Serotonin is a mood regulator. It transmits nerve impulses that help counterbalance over-arousal caused by other neurotransmitters. If a person lacks serotonin, his or her body can stay over-aroused, enhancing symptoms like fear, anger, obsessive-compulsive actions, overeating (especially carbohydrates), anxiety, fatigue, and depression—all of which are causes or symptoms of insomnia.

continued on next page

Over the past few months, *Healthy Living* has explored the numerous benefits of tryptophan, an amazing essential amino acid. In February, we shed light on tryptophan's important comeback story. In March, we focused on tryptophan's remarkable antidepressant capabilities. This month we investigate why tryptophan might be one of the best sleeping aids on the market today.

* Insomnia is significantly more common among geriatrics, women, caffeine addicts, and people living in places of extreme temperature or background noise.

Tryptophan – Your Ticket to Slumberland

continued from page 51

Tips for Tryptophan Supplementation

To get the maximum benefit from tryptophan, follow these recommendations for usage:

- Take it with B-complex vitamins and vitamin C, which help tryptophan convert to serotonin.
- Take it on an empty stomach, so it isn't competing with other nutrients or amino acids.
- As a sleep aid, FTH Nutraceuticals recommends 500 mg to 1,500 mg, 30 minutes before bedtime.

Melatonin levels in the brain rise and fall with our natural circadian patterns. Our bodies produce most of our melatonin during the night when we should be sleeping. Melatonin levels then fall to virtually undetectable levels during daytime hours. When melatonin production is thrown off-kilter, sleep gets disrupted!

Serotonin is melatonin's precursor—serotonin can actually be converted into melatonin. This means that if you boost production of serotonin (to better regulate mood), you can concurrently boost production of melatonin (to better regulate sleep).

THE TEMPORARY (AND RISKY) SOLUTION: DRUGS

For years the pharmaceutical industry has aimed its advertising dollars at a sleep-deprived public. They have developed such drugs as triazolam (Halcion®) and zolpidem tartrate (Ambien®) that are beneficial for sleep in the short term, but not without the possibility of side effects and complications in the long term. Even doctors admit pharmaceutical sleeping aids should be used sparingly, if at all. Fortunately, there's a natural solution, safe even for long-term use: tryptophan.

TRYPTOPHAN AND SEROTONIN

Unfortunately, increasing serotonin levels in our systems isn't easy. The brain has a protective mechanism called the BBB (blood brain barrier, which blocks foreign substances from entering the brain). It is a tight seal of cells lining the brain's blood vessels, and preventing toxins, excessive nutrients, hormones, and even neurotransmitters from entering the brain. But the brain requires serotonin, melatonin, and other neurotransmitters for function.

As you may have heard, SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) help our bodies more efficiently produce serotonin—in the short term. But though they have temporary mood-enhancing effects, they don't induce sleep. Most SSRIs have stimulant effects, making sleep even harder for us. Also, SSRIs can't create serotonin—they can only help the body utilize it more efficiently. Though they provide temporary relief for some people, the body eventually readjusts to its new efficient state, and stops producing as much serotonin as before. So, if

you take SSRIs, besides exposing yourself to some potentially serious side effects, you could actually make your insomnia more intractable in the long run.

Tryptophan, on the other hand, is the only substance that actually facilitates serotonin production—without any side effects. Serotonin can't cross the BBB, but tryptophan does it quite well. It attaches to a transport molecule specifically designed to ship amino acids across the BBB and into the brain. Of course, the process isn't exactly easy. Tryptophan must compete with five other amino acids for a space on that transport molecule. Those five amino acids usually outnumber tryptophan eight to one, and they don't think twice about pushing tryptophan off the bus entirely. If enough tryptophan doesn't cross the BBB, the brain won't have enough serotonin or melatonin to regulate mood and sleep, and to alleviate insomnia once and for all!

Tryptophan, the least prevalent of the essential amino acids, is found in such foods as turkey, legumes, and milk. Our bodies do not receive enough tryptophan in food to make a difference in serotonin and melatonin production. Accordingly, tryptophan supplementation is practically a requirement for those of us with long-term or short-term sleep difficulties.

REST EASY

Make sure that whatever brand of tryptophan you choose uses the label "standardized." This guarantees you're getting the advertised amount in each dose. Also, make sure the brand adheres to United States Pharmacopoeia (USP) standards that require at least 99 percent purity in all supplements.

Healthy Living embraces FTH Nutraceuticals as its "best pick" for tryptophan. In an industry where supplements are often found to be just 10 to 80 percent pure, FTH is a breath of fresh air. Founder Steven Bass says, "To my knowledge, there's not another company out there that guarantees USP Pharmaceutical Grade for human use. Some companies claim to, but if you read their fine print, you'll find that they're really just embracing USP veterinary grade." When FTH administered its own double-blind studies on tryptophan, the supplement was found to be 99.6 percent pure. ■

Resources

FTH supplements, including tryptophan, are available at health food stores nationwide. For more information or to find a store in your area, visit www.fthnutraceuticals.com or call (866) 554-7900.

