

# 5-HTP the Feel Good Nutrient

by Margy Squires

*There are lots of things that make you feel good and put a smile on your face. Like chocolate melting in your mouth. The warmth of sun on your face. Listening to your favorite song. A row of happy flowers. These moments evoke a sensation in your brain that turns on feel good chemicals and one of those neurochemicals is serotonin.*

Serotonin has a way of lifting a mood, turning down pain and promoting restful sleep. And your body is well able to make serotonin from the amino acid tryptophan found in food sources such as nuts, meat and dairy. The bad news is you store very little tryptophan at any one time which means you may run low on serotonin for those feel good moments. Could be you even have one of the conditions known to have low serotonin levels such as alcoholism, chronic pain, depression, spinal injuries, fibromyalgia (FM) and SEID (ME/chronic fatigue) to name a few.

Oh, happy day! Wouldn't it be great if you could get more of this feel good chemical when you needed it? You can. In a supplement called 5-HTP.

How your body makes serotonin is by synthesizing tryptophan with special enzymes through several biochemical reactions. 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) is one step in the synthesis equation. You may wonder if you can take a tryptophan supplement but according to naturopathic Michael Murray in his book on 5-HTP, only 3% of oral tryptophan gets converted to serotonin, while over 70% of oral 5-HTP is converted to serotonin. By supplementing with 5-HTP, your body has the "raw material" to make serotonin more efficiently. Since serotonin does not store in the body, providing a sustained release (SR) form means more serotonin is around at just the right times you need it.



Serotonin is a wide-reaching chemical. As a neurotransmitter, it affects cognitive function, mood, memory and logical reasoning, fosters relaxation and helps regulate sleep. As a hormone, serotonin helps regulate appetite and peristalsis (the rhythmic movement in the GI tract), to aid digestion. Likewise, a low level of serotonin will affect these functions and those with FM and SEID (ME/chronic fatigue) will experience symptoms of fibro-fog, poor sleep, increased pain, irritable bowel and possibly weight gain.

Quality sleep makes you feel good on several levels. It improves your immunity, ability to learn and remember, influences blood sugar levels, and helps your heart by decreasing stress. When you get into stage three or four of sleep your body makes human growth hormone (HGH). Besides helping the body's ability to repair itself, HGH is considered an anti-aging hormone. When you sleep well, you wake up refreshed and feeling good.

Pain, on the other hand, can be a definite "downer". It's hard to smile, especially when pain is chronic and with you 24/7. Pain interferes with thinking, moving and your quality of life. How many things do you postpone or not do because of pain? In chronic pain and fibromyalgia, an amplified pain syndrome, serotonin levels are often found low. Restoring levels can turn that pain dial down and allow you to participate in activities that make you happy.



So what is the supplement 5-HTP? 5-HTP is naturally made within certain plants, particularly in the seeds of the West African shrub, *griffonia simplicifolia*. If you are trying it for the first time, you may want to start at 50 mg and gradually increase each day. People who already know the benefits of 5-HTP will be glad the SR form is available as it will make it even easier to maintain serotonin levels in a steady state, especially in chronic pain situations like fibromyalgia.

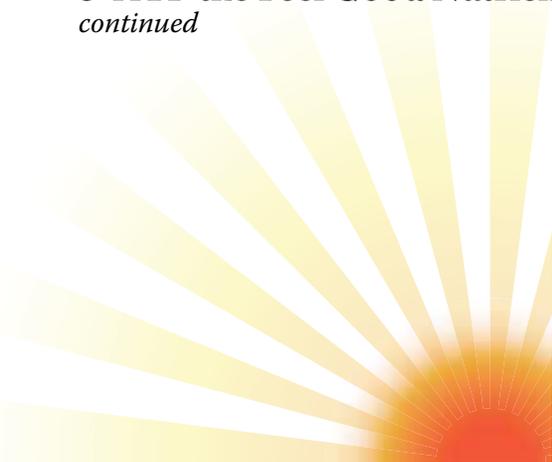
One additional 5-HTP benefit that some may find helpful is how 5-HTP may assist weight loss efforts. Once serotonin levels increase, your hunger diminishes and you crave less carbs. You feel satiated without feeling "deprived" of food, which makes weight loss easier, particularly for those on a low carb diet. And the SR form offers a more

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consistent control of carb cravings. Of note, in one study of 47 FM patients, a strong correlation exists between carb cravings and cognitive issues so less carbs in FM may mean more “smarts”.

5-HTP has been studied for more than 40 years and its safety record is well known. There are some cautions with 5-HTP and you should check with your healthcare professional before using if pregnant or lactating, and if you are on a medication such as antidepressant SSRI or SRNI, MAO inhibitors or sedatives. Since 5-HTP may cause drowsiness in some individuals, try your first dose in the evening and take at night if it does make you sleepy.

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