

A Yellow Spice for a Sunny Mood



Written By, Maureen Williams, ND

While most antidepressant medications are believed to work by changing the levels of chemicals in the brain called neurotransmitters, many scientists now think that chronic inflammation may contribute to depression. Curcumin, a well-known anti-inflammatory compound from the herb turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), was studied for its effect in people with major depressive disorder and was found to be as helpful as the antidepressant drug fluoxetine (Prozac). The findings of this preliminary study, published in *Phytotherapy Research*, report a combination of curcumin and fluoxetine was slightly more effective than either alone.

Curcumin performs as well as medication

The researchers treated 51 people with major depressive disorder who were not suicidal and had no other psychiatric ailments with either 20 mg of fluoxetine per day, 1,000 mg of curcumin per day, or a combination of both for six weeks. They monitored the participants' depression symptoms using a series of questionnaires. All three groups improved during the study:

- The percentages of people whose symptoms improved enough to be considered a positive response: 64.7% in the fluoxetine group, 62.5% in the curcumin group, and 77.8% in the combination group.
- The percentages of people who experienced remission (they no longer had depression): 52.9% in the fluoxetine group, 37.5% in the curcumin group, and 55.5% in the combination group.
- The percentage of people whose global efficacy (a measure of overall change in people being treated) ranked as good or excellent: 70.5% of people using fluoxetine, 75% of people using curcumin, and 83.3% of people using both.

Curcumin deserves a second look

Although the combination of fluoxetine and curcumin appeared to be more effective than either alone, the differences in response rates, remission rates, and global efficacy between the three groups were too small to be considered statistically meaningful.

“This study provides the first clinical evidence that curcumin may be used as an effective and safe modality for treatment in patients with major depressive disorder,” the study’s authors said.

“This study highlights the need for future large-scale clinical trials evaluating the use of this safe and natural dietary botanical as a possible mono-therapy in patients with depressive disorders.”

Reducing inflammation may relieve depression

Turmeric is best known as the ingredient that gives curries their distinctive yellow color and pungent taste. It also has an important place in the pharmacies of traditional Asian medical practitioners. Researchers are beginning to study curcumin from turmeric for its apparent benefits in people with inflammatory conditions including arthritis, heart disease, cancer, and autoimmune diseases.

This study suggests that people with depression, which has a link to inflammation, may also benefit from curcumin. Here are some other ways to reduce inflammation and ease symptoms of depression:

- *Enjoy fish.* People who eat fish regularly are less likely to suffer from depression than people who don’t. Taking fish oil supplements that provide the omega-3 polyunsaturated fats EPA and DHA may also be protective. One teaspoon of fish oil per day is a good amount for most people.
- *Take vitamin D.* Adequate levels of vitamin D are needed to keep inflammation at bay, and low vitamin D levels have been linked to depression. Many of us don’t get enough sun to keep our levels up, so taking a supplement—at least in the winter—is a good idea.

Many health experts recommend 2,000 IU of D per day.

- *Add a B complex.* B vitamins have many actions in the body, including keeping inflammatory chemicals under control. In particular, vitamin B6, vitamin B12, and folic acid have been found to protect against inflammation and depression. A good combination is likely to provide up to 100 mg of B6, 1,000 micrograms of B12, and 800 micrograms of folic acid per day.
- *Take a walk.* Moderate exercise can reduce inflammation by improving circulation. In addition, exercise triggers the release of anti-inflammatory chemicals in the brain that lift our mood. As little as three hours per week can ease the symptoms of depression.

(*Phytother Res* 2013;doi: 10.1002/ptr.5025)

Maureen Williams, ND, completed her doctorate in naturopathic medicine at Bastyr University in Seattle and has been in private practice since 1995. With an abiding commitment to access to care, she has worked in free clinics in the US and Canada, and in rural clinics in Guatemala and Honduras where she has studied traditional herbal medicine. She currently lives and practices in Victoria, BC, and lectures and writes extensively for both professional and community audiences on topics including family nutrition, menopause, anxiety and depression, heart disease, cancer, and easing stress. Dr. Williams is a regular contributor to Healthnotes Newswire.

Copyright © 2018 Healthnotes, Inc. All rights reserved. www.healthnotes.com

[Learn more about Healthnotes, the company.](#)

Reference:

Sanmukhani J, Satodia V, Trivedi J, Patel T, Tiwari D, Panchal B, Goel A, Tripathi CB., “Efficacy and safety of curcumin in major depressive disorder: a randomized controlled trial.”, *Phytotherapy Research* , 2014 Apr;28(4):579-85. doi: 10.1002/ptr.5025. Epub 2013 Jul 6.