



5 Vitamins, Amino Acids & Herbs to Manage Stress & Anxiety

Do you ever feel that stress or anxiety is interfering with your daily life, productivity or happiness? Have you resisted taking anxiety medications due to concerns about side effects? Would you prefer to replace the drugs you have been taking with natural remedies? If so, you might want to explore some of the natural means of managing stress and anxiety discussed below.

Definitions & Symptoms

Stress and anxiety frequently coexist, often with depression, eating disorders (like obesity), and substance abuse. In fact, it is estimated that unmanaged stress and anxiety may accompany or contribute to 90% of all illnesses, including diabetes, chronic fatigue, chronic headaches, hypertension, ulcers, heart disease and candidiasis.

Stress is an automatic, negative, psychological, and physical response to various overwhelming internal and external forces called stressors (including lack of sleep, allergens, pain/poor health, and work/social pressures). It releases neurochemicals and hormones to prepare us for action (often called the “fight-or-flight” response) and, if excessive or prolonged, can wreak havoc on one’s life and health. Stress is generally characterized by fatigue, sleep disorders, irritability, and constant worrying.

Anxiety may be hereditary to some extent, can be provoked by internal or interpersonal conflict, and causes people to feel frightened and apprehensive for no apparent reason. Symptoms of anxiety can include severe muscle tension, excessive sweating, headaches, digestive problems, concentration difficulties, impatience/irritability, and insomnia/restlessness. The degree of anxiety can vary and, if extreme, might rise to the level of one of these five anxiety disorders: Panic Disorder (repeated episodes of intense fear that appear suddenly, often without warning and with varying frequency); Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD); Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)(can develop at any age, in a victim or victim’s family members, following exposure to a terrifying event/ordeal in which grave physical harm was inflicted or threatened); Phobias; or General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) (chronic, excessive worrying about various personal matters well beyond the average daily level).

The Conventional Approach: Pharmacotherapy

When a patient complains of excessive levels of stress or anxiety, conventional practitioners commonly prescribe various medications, such as benzodiazepines, selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitors (SSRIs), and beta-blockers. All of the pharmacotherapeutic drugs have long lists of potential side effects, which include: (1) benzodiazepines (e.g., Valium®, Xanax®, and Librium®): increased anxiety, significant memory impairment, and addiction (especially in alcoholics); (2) SSRIs (e.g., Prozac®, Lexapro®, and Zoloft®): agitation, decreased libido, delayed/lacking ability to orgasm, and insomnia; and (3) beta-blockers (e.g., Tenormin® and Inderal®): fatigue, depression, erectile dysfunction, memory loss and insomnia.

Natural Approaches to Relaxation: Vitamins - Amino Acids – Herbs

A variety of natural alternatives, either individually or in combination, can generally manage moderate levels of stress and anxiety safely and without side effects. The nutrients discussed here represent those that this writer, in clinical practice or through research, has found to be especially effective. Preferably with the guidance of a holistic practitioner, you might consider trying these relatively affordable remedies:

Niacinamide (Vitamin B3): “Nature’s Valium”

Niacinamide (also known as nicotinamide) is the major form of vitamin B3 in the blood. It penetrates the brain easily, is non-addictive, and does not produce the flush effect of the niacin form of vitamin B3. In 1979, Hoffman La Roche, the Swiss drug company that manufactured Valium, described niacinamide as “a brain constituent that has benzodiazepine-like actions.” In clinical practice, this writer has determined that the generally effective daily dose is 2 grams, three times per day.

L-Theanine

L-Theanine is an amino acid derived from green tea that easily crosses the blood-brain barrier and is thus readily absorbed by brain cells. It works by helping muscles relax, increasing the concentration of the neurotransmitters serotonin and dopamine, and supporting the production of alpha brain waves (associated with a calm, worry-free mind). Both animal and human studies have uncovered theanine’s

ability to promote relaxation without daytime drowsiness, boost cognitive function, and support brain health. In 2004, researchers published the results of a double-blind human study comparing the effects of theanine and Xanax®, a benzodiazepine. Each of the 16 healthy volunteers took at separate times either 1 mg of Xanax® (a substantial dose), 200 mg of theanine, or a placebo. At the initial measurement of whether a person felt anxious, only the theanine evidenced a relaxing effect. In another study, Japanese researchers examined the effect of theanine on math anxiety and determined that it controlled the “fight-or-flight” response and thus suppressed the release of adrenalin and stress hormones. Without any known side effects, theanine is generally recommended on an empty stomach in daily doses of 100-400 mg.

L-Tyrosine

L-Tyrosine is a non-essential amino acid that is a precursor to the neurotransmitters dopamine, epinephrine and norepinephrine (adrenaline), which regulate mood and stimulate metabolism. While its adrenaline-producing activity seems to contradict tyrosine’s potential role as a relaxant, its dopamine production balances its norepinephrine production, yielding an alert, clear, uplifted but calm mind state. It also may reduce stress and anxiety by supporting the function of the adrenal and thyroid glands. In some sensitive individuals, tyrosine can cause rapid heart rate or hypertension. If you are concerned, start with a daily dose as low as 200 mg and work up to a level that manages your anxiety.

Lemon Balm (Melissa officinalis)

Lemon balm, a member of the mint family, has been used since the Middle Ages for a variety of conditions, including stress, anxiety, and insomnia. It is available in capsule form, as a liquid tincture, in homeopathic remedies, or as a tea. Although most studies have examined this herb in combination with others, such as valerian, hops and chamomile, there are a few studies that have studied it alone. In one double-blind, placebo-controlled trial, 20 volunteers reported after two weeks that 300 mg of lemon balm administered twice daily produced: a 49% reduction in anxiety; a 72% reduction in anxiety-associated symptoms; and a 39% decrease in insomnia.

St. John’s Wort (Hypericum perforatum)

Though most think of St. John’s Wort as an herb for depression, it can be effective for moderate levels of anxiety. It works as an SSRI (like Prozac®, Lexapro®, and Zoloft®) and thus increases levels of serotonin in the brain. Note that St. John’s Wort may cause increased sunlight sensitivity.

Conclusion

While various vitamins, amino acids, and herbs can ease anxiety and stress, it is most wise to be well informed about these remedies and your own condition, and to know especially whether they interact with medications you are taking. If you take anxiety medication but prefer to try a natural approach, where appropriate, consider asking your doctor to help you first lower the dose of your medication. Also consider seeking the guidance of a natural practitioner (especially if you are pregnant, planning to have a child, or are breast feeding), and inform your doctor before terminating treatment with any anxiety medication.

The statements in this article have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. None of the natural remedies discussed herein are intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease.

Submitted by Michael Dworkin, P.D., M.S., a Registered Pharmacist and State Certified Clinical Nutritionist (CT Certification #00203), with J. Erika Dworkin, J.D., Dip.C.N./Board Cert. Holistic Nutrition (pending). Owner of the Manchester Parkade Health Shoppe (860.646.8178, 378 West Middle Turnpike, Manchester), Pharmacist Dworkin has been guiding patients since 1956 and is available for consultation by appointment. Erika is available to speak to groups. References are available upon request. See ad on page 17.