It's Back... and Not a Moment Too Soon

by Elaine Moore

An article in the April 2008 Life Extension Foundation Journal by William Faloon explains in “Why Aging People Become Depressed, Fatigued and Overweight.” The increase in depression, fatigue, and obesity can be directly linked to the 1980's when the dietary supplement tryptophan was taken off the market because of one contaminated batch of tryptophan produced in Japan. An amino acid produced naturally by the body, tryptophan is needed to produce serotonin in the brain. While certain foods like turkey help us produce tryptophan, most people fail to produce adequate brain serotonin levels. The good news is that the FDA has once again approved the use of pure tryptophan supplements. The reasons I've already ordered my supply include:

Serotonin is a brain neurotransmitter that promotes restful sleep, well-being, and satiety. When Serotonin levels are low, people often experience depression, anxiety, insomnia, and the urge to overeat.

The enzymes needed to convert tryptophan into serotonin may be too low for the small amount of tryptophan the body produces. Additionally, enzymes that are influenced by inflammation and aging can break down tryptophan before it converts to serotonin.

Drugs like Zoloft and Paxil work by increasing serotonin levels. Tryptophan should not be taken by people using these medications since it can potentiate the effects of these medications. Like the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs, e.g. Zoloft), tryptophan should also not be taken with monoamine oxidase inhibitors such as Nardil or Parnate. Taken alone, tryptophan has a proven safety record and was used for many decades before the 1980s.

Improvement in sleep is seen in doses as low as 1,000 mg daily. At high doses (100 mg/dk/day or 7,000 mg taken by a 150 lb person) tryptophan can cause gastric irritation, vomiting, blurry vision, headaches, and nausea.