

## 5-HTP, omega-3 acids promising treatments

Two nutrients are gaining attention among researchers as promising treatments for a variety of mental disorders ranging from depression to schizophrenia. Neither has yet been used extensively in the treatment of autism, but both appear to reduce anxiety, hyperactivity, sleep disorders, mood disorders, and other problems commonly seen in autistic individuals.

### 5-HTP

5-HTP is an abbreviation for 5-hydroxytryptophan, a substance made by the body from the amino acid tryptophan. 5-HTP is the intermediate step between tryptophan and the brain chemical serotonin, and abnormal serotonin levels have been linked to autism.

Available over the counter to U.S. consumers since 1994, 5-HTP is made from the Griffonia seed, which grows on an African tree. Like Prozac and other selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), 5-HTP appears to work primarily by altering serotonin levels in the brain. Unlike tryptophan, a nutrient banned in the United States after a contaminated batch from one manufacturer caused a rash of illness and several deaths, 5-HTP is not produced synthetically for commercial consumption.

According to physician Ray Sahelian, who has studied 5-HTP extensively, preliminary studies indicate that the nutrient may be very useful in treating mild depression. A Swiss study that compared 5-HTP to the antidepressant fluvoxamine (Luvox), for instance, found that both substances were "distinctly effective" in treating depression, and that 5-HTP's effects were equal to those of the drug. In addition, fewer patients in the 5-HTP group exhibited side effects. (However, when taken at high dosages, 5-HTP can cause nausea, other gastrointestinal problems, and sleepiness.)

Several studies also indicate that 5-HTP can reduce the incidence or severity of panic attacks and anxiety, problems frequently experienced by autistic individuals. R. S. Kahn et al. conducted a 12-week open-label study of the effects of 5-HTP on ten patients with panic attacks, agoraphobia, or generalized anxiety, and found that nine of the patients improved significantly.

In addition, anecdotal reports indicate that 5-HTP can be useful as an occasional sleep aid, especially when combined with melatonin. Physician Richard Kunin, who recommends that autistic children take the nutrient at bedtime and in the morning, says, "It helps them sleep and they behave better." Kunin recommends combining 5-HTP with vitamin B6, other B vitamins, magnesium, and dimethylglycine (DMG).

*continued on page 7*

## Study: FC based on power of suggestion

Cheryl Burgess and colleagues say that data from their recent study of facilitated communication (FC) "support the hypothesis that facilitated communication is an instance of automatic writing, akin to that observed in hypnosis and with Ouija boards."

Facilitated communication is a technique in which a facilitator physically aids a disabled individual in typing messages, generally by supporting the disabled person's shoulder, arm, or wrist.

The technique was very popular in the early 1990s, until more than 50 studies demonstrated that the messages being communicated came from the facilitators, not the disabled typists. Despite these findings, the technique is still taught through at least one major university.

To investigate the phenomenon of FC further, Burgess and colleagues recruited 40 college students and taught them facilitated communication techniques, using a training tape produced by FC proponents. In addition, half of the facilitators watched a videotape presenting FC in a positive light, and the other half watched a videotape explaining that the technique was controversial.

The students were then asked to facilitate for a person described as developmentally disabled and unable to speak. (In reality, this person was a non-disabled student.) The facilitators received information sheets about their subject, listing biographical data invented by the researchers. With the exception of the "disabled" person's name, none of the biographical information was known to the "disabled" subject. The "disabled" subject was instructed not to look at the keyboard, computer screen, or facilitator, or to touch the keyboard except with one extended finger.

Burgess and colleagues report that all 40 facilitators produced communications that they attributed partly or wholly to the "disabled" individual. Most of the facilitators believed that all of the communications were coming from the "disabled" typist, and no facilitator believed that he or she was generating all of the communications.

Even when the researchers excluded the one response known to both the facilitator and the "disabled" student ("What is your name?"), 68 percent of the facilitators produced at least one answer using information from the false biographies. Interestingly, Burgess et al. say, the facilitators who watched the videotape stating that FC was controversial produced as many correct responses as those who watched the positive FC video. "In this sense," they say, "illusory

facilitation appears to be a very robust phenomenon."

Following facilitation sessions, the facilitators were given a test known as the Chevreul pendulum illusion. This test measures "automatic" behavior—that is, behavior that is initiated by the participant, but which the participant is unaware of initiating. In the test, participants are asked to hold a pendulum (in this case, a washer tied to a string) and to either

Burgess et al. say the illusion of FC may be so powerful "because it engages participants in what seems to be an exceptionally important and meaningful task."

imagine that the pendulum is moving in a certain direction, or prevent the pendulum from moving.

Burgess et al. report that facilitators' responses on this test correlated significantly with the number of relevant answers they produced during facilitation—an indication that FC is similar to the automatic writing produced by people using Ouija boards or by subjects under hypnosis.

The researchers conclude that while automatic writing can be induced in 10 to 30 percent of the population, "training in facilitated communication seems unique in its ability to provoke complex automatic behavior in a substantial majority of people, possibly because it engages participants in what seems to be an exceptionally important and meaningful task."

"Facilitated communication as an ideomotor response," Cheryl A. Burgess, Irving Kirsch, Howard Shane, Kristen L. Niederauer, Steven M. Graham, and Alyson Bacon; *Psychological Science*, Vol. 9, No. 1, January 1998, pp. 71-74. Address: Irving Kirsch, Department of Psychology, U-20, University of Connecticut, 406 Babbidge Road, Storrs, CT 06269-1020.

### MARK YOUR CALENDAR!

May 9 (Mother's Day)  
Secretin Segment on  
'It's a Miracle,'  
PAX Network

October 2 and 3  
Defeat Autism Now!  
(DANI!)  
Conference  
Cherry Hill, New Jersey