GENERAL

Serotonin: The Key to a Happier and Healthier You

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Received: 06 February 2025 **Published:** 16 May 2025 **Volume 12, Issue 2** (Apr–Jun 2025)
Article no.: e116 **Open access** · free to read

Ever had one of those days where everything feels off, but then a simple walk in the park or a quiet stroll through nature suddenly lifts your mood? You might think it's just the fresh air and the gentle breeze working their magic—but there's actually some science behind it. It's not just your mind playing tricks on you. The real hero here is a tiny yet powerful molecule called serotonin—the ultimate 'feel-good' chemical in your body.

What is Serotonin?

Serotonin, often called the 'feel-good hormone', is a chemical that helps in transmitting signals from one nerve cell to another, and thereby make us feel things. Found in both the brain and intestines, it regulates behavior, mood, memory, and overall well-being and thus plays a vital role in how we feel and how our body functions. Understanding its functions and natural ways to boost it can be a game-changer for both mental and physical health. It is involved in various functions including:

- **Behavior**: Serotonin helps you stay calm and in control. Low levels of serotonin might make people more aggressive, while boosting serotonin can help them manage their emotions better. (Miczek & Donat, 1989).
- **Mood**: While we still don't fully understand the exact mechanisms, many studies suggest that low serotonin levels can contribute to low mood and depression.
- **Memory**: Serotonin helps the brain stay flexible by strengthening its ability to form new connections and adapt to new information. This process, called neuroplasticity, plays a key role in learning and memory (Bacqué-Cazenave et al., 2020)
- **Sleep**: Studies on animals have shown that a specific part of the brain releases serotonin to help the body feel sleepy. When this process was disrupted, the animals had trouble building up the need for sleep. Since this brain region works in a similar way in humans, scientists believe the same could be true for us. This research may also explain why some antidepressants, which increase serotonin levels, can affect sleep patterns.
- **Appetite and Digestion**: Many studies have shown a link between serotonin levels and digestive issues like Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS). Serotonin plays a key role in gut function, and imbalances in this chemical may contribute to IBS symptoms such as pain, bloating, and irregular bowel movements.

How to Naturally Boost Serotonin Levels

1. **Exercise Regularly:** Physical activity, particularly aerobic exercises like running, swimming, or cycling, increases serotonin levels. Even 30 minutes of moderate exercise daily can have a profound impact on your mood and energy levels.
2. **Sunlight Exposure:** Spending time in natural sunlight boosts serotonin production. Aim for at least 15-30 minutes of sunlight exposure daily, preferably in the morning.
3. **Mindfulness and Meditation:** Practices like meditation and mindfulness may help increase serotonin levels, promoting a sense of calm and well-being. Regular engagement in these activities has been linked to improved mood, reduced stress, and better overall mental health.
4. **Nutrition:** Although this has the weakest evidence so far, your diet might still play a role in regulating serotonin levels in your body. Certain foods, especially those rich in tryptophan, could help boost serotonin production, potentially influencing mood and overall well-being.

Final Thoughts

Serotonin is vital for both mental and physical health, influencing how we feel, think, and function. By incorporating healthy habits like a balanced diet, regular exercise, and mindfulness practices, you can naturally boost your serotonin levels and enhance your overall quality of life. Remember, small steps can lead to significant changes—start today for a happier, healthier tomorrow.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

How to cite this article (Vancouver)
Ali J. Serotonin: The Key to a Happier and Healthier You. CHEARS Chronical. 2025;12(2):e116. Available from: https://chears.in/journal/volume-12/issue-2/serotonin-the-key-to-a-happier-and-healthier-you-116
Published in CHEARS Chronical. https://chears.in/journal/volume-12/issue-2/serotonin-the-key-to-a-happier-and-healthier-you-116