

THE SEROTONIN FRIENDLY WAY OF EATING

For those of us that follow nutrition science, we know how controversial the topic can be. Directing attention toward nutrition science and weight loss results in even more confusion because the diet industry is a grand money making center where nutrition land sharks pull you in with catchy promises then take your money, leaving you with no results.

Herbal Phen-Fen, St. John's Wort and 5-HTP are the new kids on the block for weight loss and weight control. The theory behind their use involves balancing serotonin metabolism in the brain. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter with many functions. When serotonin levels are low, the following behaviors may manifest:

- depression
- impulsivity
- short attention span
- scattered thoughts
- reactive
- suicidal

As if this wasn't bad enough, serotonin levels are also involved in appetite regulation, particularly carbohydrate controls. For example, low levels of serotonin in the brain can result in craving sweets and craving other carbohydrates like bread, pasta and cereal. Conversely, when serotonin levels in the brain are optimal these cravings disappear and normal eating patterns emerge such as looking forward to healthy balanced meals and taking or leaving dessert.

Consuming the above supplements for serotonin balance is an aggressive approach which could result in side effects for some people. Herbal Phen-Fen, St. John's Wort and 5-HTP are not magic pills for weight loss. A more sensible approach to achieving serotonin balance would be to eat a serotonin friendly diet. Please keep in mind that most unsuccessful attempts at weight loss or weight control are a result of poor dietary choices, lack of exercise and excessive stress, not a serotonin imbalance. However, those of you who fit the profile outlined below may try the serotonin friendly way of eating and see if it gives you results.

Low Brain Serotonin? Sugar-sensitivity? or Both?

People who have serotonin imbalance are often sugar-sensitive as well. A sugar-sensitive person craves sugar abnormally compared to other people. When a sugar-sensitive person eats something sweet, the result is not a pleasant burst of energy caused from a mild increase in blood sugar, but instead the following feelings resulting from a severe drop in blood sugar:

- tired all the time
- restless
- confused
- poor memory and concentration
- more irritable than usual
- unexpected anger

The serotonin friendly way of eating is also friendly for the sugar-sensitive person because sugar and refined starch affect both your blood sugar and your brain serotonin levels. When your blood sugar is normal you are:

- energetic
- tired when you're supposed to be
- focused and clear
- relaxed
- able to concentrate and solve problems
- easy going and even-tempered

To recap, the profile of a person who may benefit from the serotonin friendly diet looks something like this:

- craves sweets (consumes candy, soda, dessert daily)
- craves starch like bread, pasta, tortillas, bagels and cereals
- history of hypoglycemia
- history of depression
- personal or family history of alcoholism

- fatigue and lethargy
- emotional, moody and irrational
- over-reactive to stress
- unable to lose weight

The main premises of the serotonin friendly way of eating are discussed in depth in books such as *SugarBusters*, *Mood Cure*, and the *Carbohydrate Addicts Diet* and include:

1. Eat three meals a day at regular intervals
2. Eat complete protein at each meal
3. Limit carbohydrates, especially the refined varieties (e.g. white flours)
4. Reduce or eliminate sugars and alcohol
5. Consume healthy fat at each meal

Eat Three Meals A Day at Regular Intervals

Remember that eating gives us energy and keeps our metabolism going strong. Neglecting to eat a balanced meal every 4-5 hours will result in poor energy and many of the other symptoms listed above because of unbalanced blood sugar and unbalanced brain serotonin. You may also have problems losing weight because your metabolism will be slow.

Definitely eat breakfast, and I don't mean a bagel and a cup of coffee. Even if you're not hungry you should try to get in the habit of having a complex carbohydrate breakfast with some protein. Examples include:

- Omelet with 2 eggs and some sautéed veggies
- Fruit smoothie with whole milk, fresh or frozen fruit, protein powder, yogurt and slivered almonds
- 3/4 cup whole fat cottage cheese with 1/2 cup strawberries
- breakfast burrito with whole wheat tortilla, eggs, beans and cheese
- waffle made with whole grain mix, protein powder and nuts with applesauce and yogurt

Eat Complete Protein with Each Meal

Protein slows your digestion and stabilizes your blood sugar. Because protein is more slowly digested it provides satiety which keeps you satisfied until the next meal. Proteins are also a source of the required amino acids which are useful for proper brain function along with thousands of other cell functions. In particular, protein foods provide the amino acid tryptophan which your body needs to make serotonin. Some healthy protein choices for a meal include:

2 eggs	2 TBSP almond butter
1/2 - 1 can of tuna	4 oz. tempeh
2 TBSP protein powder	3 oz. cheese
4 oz. turkey breast	1 cup yogurt
4 oz. salmon	1 medium chicken breast

Limit Carbohydrates, Especially the Refined Varieties

Carbohydrates are found in grains, vegetables, and fruits. All carbohydrates break down into sugar in the blood stream. Although whole grains are more slowly broken down into sugar than refined "white" starches, many people still have a sensitivity to excess carbohydrates found in grains, fruits, and starchy vegetables (e.g. corn and yams). The serotonin friendly way of eating recommends eliminating alcohol, simple sugars (glucose, sucrose, fructose, honey, corn syrup, etc.) and simple starch (white flour products, white rice, pasta). Instead consume limited amounts of complex carbohydrates such as whole grains, beans, root vegetables, and broccoli. You may include some whole grain bread, pasta and tortillas, but keep the serving sizes small and watch for any "addictive" behavioral trends with their consumption.

Fruit is considered a simple carbohydrate. To prevent blood sugar and serotonin imbalances, have only 1-2 servings of fruit per day with a mixed meal. Also choose lower-sugar fruits such as blueberries,

strawberries, apricots, raspberries, cherries, and watermelon.

Reduce or Eliminate Sugars and Alcohol

This step is vital for biochemical stability and gaining control of health. If you are addicted to sugar and white starch you may need to treat getting off sugar much like getting off alcohol or drugs. Do it slowly and get help. Don't try to find a sugar substitute because all sugars will affect you the same. Instead, set your mind to removing sugar from your diet altogether or at least most of the time. Since this is a very difficult step, I encourage you to read books about sugar-sensitivity and "detoxifying" from sugar (e.g. Mood Cure by Julia Ross) and get some professional guidance as needed.

Consume Healthy Fat at Each Meal

Similar to protein and high fiber complex carbohydrates, fats also slow down digestion and slow the release of sugar into the bloodstream. Fat will help you feel more satisfied and will decrease carbohydrate cravings. Healthy fats also help create hormones that are so vital for body balance. Some food choices with healthy fat include:

- 1-2 tsp. sunflower seeds stirred into full-fat yogurt
- 1-2 TBSP almond butter on celery
- Olive oil as salad dressing with vinegar, lemon and salt
- ½ avocado on a salad
- handful of raw walnuts or almonds and a half of red pepper
- 5 black olives
- 1 TBSP coconut oil in smoothie
- 1 pat of butter on steamed greens
- 4 oz. grass-fed beef in salad

To Summarize

The primary purpose of this article is to reiterate that there is no magic pill for weight loss, and to offer a possible solution for those of you who are sugar-sensitive, carbohydrate addicts or serotonin deficient. Normalizing these problems through the serotonin friendly way of eating may be your answer to weight loss and health. For further discussion or assistance with this issue you may contact one of the Nutritionists at one of our store locations.

Written by Tracey Scheig, RD. with modifications by Jen Allbritton, CN