



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

The mood-lowering effect of tryptophan depletion: possible explanation for discrepant findings

Does, A.J.W. van der

Citation

Does, A. J. W. van der. (2001). The mood-lowering effect of tryptophan depletion: possible explanation for discrepant findings. *Archives Of General Psychiatry*, 58, 200-201. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14404>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/14404>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

succinylcholine chloride (2 mg/kg) and the monkeys were ventilated with positive pressure 100% oxygen. Seizure expression was monitored via scalp electroencephalography (EEG), electromyography, and visuomotor manifestations in a nonparalyzed limb. One subject (No. 1) had a chronically implanted intracerebral multicontact electrode in place, permitting recording of intracerebral EEG and TMS-induced voltage.⁵

The 2 trials with the commercial device did not produce a seizure. In contrast, each of the subsequent 8 trials with the custom device produced a generalized tonic-clonic seizure ranging in duration from 10 to 20 seconds, documented by motor manifestations, electromyography, scalp EEG, and intracerebral EEG results. Intracerebral recordings documented that peak induced voltage with the custom TMS device matched that achieved with electroconvulsive shock and occurred in the prefrontal cortex. The commercially available device achieved less than half the voltage induced by electroconvulsive shock.⁶

Magnetic seizure threshold was titrated by administering trains of increasing duration until a generalized seizure was induced. Due to coil heating, no more than 2 trains could be administered in a single session. Thus, the various train durations were administered across 4 sessions. Seizures were reliably obtained with parameter settings of 40 Hz, 90% of maximal stimulator output, administered for 4 to 5 seconds. This represents stimulation at more than 400% of the electromyographically defined motor threshold. Stimulation at this intensity is far in excess of recommended safety guidelines for human use of subconvulsive rTMS.⁷ The purpose of this experiment, however, was intentional seizure induction, and high intensities were needed to overcome the anticonvulsant effects of anesthesia.

These findings demonstrate the feasibility of rTMS seizure induction under general anesthesia. The fact that the commercial device was incapable of eliciting seizures suggests that the broader pulse width and/or faster frequency of the custom device were needed. Future work will focus on parameterization and safety to support clinical use in humans as a novel convulsive treatment. The enhanced control over dosage and focality achieved with rTMS may offer the capacity to focus seizure induction in the prefrontal cortex, thereby improving the efficacy and limiting the cognitive side effects due to medial temporal lobe stimulation. This animal model in which magnetic seizure threshold can be easily assessed, will provide information relevant to safety guidelines for the human use of nonconvulsive and convulsive rTMS, and may provide a new model for studies of epilepsy.

Sarah H. Lisanby, MD
Bruce Luber, PhD
Harold A. Sackeim, PhD
Department of Biological Psychiatry
New York State Psychiatric Institute
1051 Riverside Dr
New York, NY 10032

A. D. Finck, MD
New York

Charles Schroeder, PhD
Orangeburg, NY

This work was supported by grants from the National Alliance for Research in Schizophrenia and Depression, Great Neck, NY (Drs Lisanby and Sackeim); grants MH35636 (Dr Sackeim), MH01577, and MH60884 (Dr Lisanby) from the National Institutes of Mental Health, Bethesda, Md; and The Magstim Company Ltd, Whitland, Wales (Drs Lisanby and Sackeim).

Presented at the Society of Biological Psychiatry annual meeting, Washington, DC, May 14, 1999.

Corresponding author: Sarah H. Lisanby, MD, Department of Biological Psychiatry, New York State Psychiatric Institute, 1051 Riverside Dr, Box 126, New York, NY 10032-2695.

1. Sackeim HA, Prudic J, Devanand DP, Kiersky JE, Fitzsimons L, Moody BJ, McElhiney MC, Coleman EA, Settembrino JM. Effects of stimulus intensity and electrode placement on the efficacy and cognitive effects of electroconvulsive therapy. *N Engl J Med*. 1993;328:839-846.
2. Wassermann EM, Cohen LG, Flitman SS, Chen R, Hallett M. Seizures in healthy people with repeated "safe" trains of transcranial magnetic stimuli. *Lancet*. 1996;347:825-826.
3. Ziemann U, Steinhoff BJ, Tergau F, Paulus W. Transcranial magnetic stimulation: its current role in epilepsy research. *Epilepsy Res*. 1998;30:11-30.
4. Weissman JD, Epstein CM, Davey KR. Magnetic brain stimulation and brain size: relevance to animal studies. *Electroenceph Clin Neurophysiol*. 1992;85:215-219.
5. Lisanby SH, Luber BL, Schroeder C, Osman M, Finck D, Amassian V, Arezzo J, Sackeim HA. rTMS in primates: intracerebral measurement of rTMS and ECS induced voltage in vivo. *Electroenceph Clin Neurophysiol*. 1998;107:79P.
6. Lisanby SH, Luber BM, Finck D, Osman M, Schroeder C, Sackeim HA. Magnetic stimulation therapy: a novel convulsive technique. *Biological Psychiatry*. 1999;45:64-65S.
7. Wassermann EM. Risk and safety of repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation: report and suggested guidelines from the International Workshop in the Safety of Repetitive Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, June 5-7, 1996. *Electroencephalogr Clin Neurophysiol*. 1998;108:1-16.

The Mood-Lowering Effect of Tryptophan Depletion: Possible Explanation for Discrepant Findings

Tryptophan depletion (TD) is an experimental procedure for studying brain serotonin function. The mood-lowering effect of TD has been demonstrated in formerly depressed patients treated with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) or monoamine oxidase inhibitors¹ and in medication-free women with a history of recurrent depressive episodes.² Typically, a little more than half of the patients experience the effect. It is not exactly clear why some patients experience the effect while others do not. Several studies have recently found that the effect may be less consistent than previously thought. Moore et al³ observed no effect on mood in fully remitted patients medicated with SSRIs. In a study⁴ of patients who had responded to treatment with citalopram, only 5 of 12 patients relapsed, and the effect seemed to be clinically significant in only 1 patient. In a third study,⁵ only 33% of 21 patients experienced a relapse. Moore et al³ suggest that their unexpected finding may be related to sample differences. In comparison with earlier studies, their patients had been in treatment longer and were less depressed. Therefore, the effect of TD may be limited to recently recovered, medicated patients.³ However, clinically significant symptom increases have been observed in euthymic patients who had not been receiving medications for at least 6 months.² Another factor that might be involved is a patient's history of suicidal ideation.⁶

A simple explanation for the negative findings may be insufficient depletion. In Moore et al,³ the mean reduction of free plasma tryptophan levels was 52%. This is lower than the typically reported 75% to 90% mean reduction. However, because this value was significantly different from the reduction in the placebo condition (5.6%), the authors consider their study successful in obtaining a contrast between TD and placebo conditions. However, the extent of depletion needed to achieve reliable mood effects has never been established. It cannot be ruled out, therefore, that there is a threshold that needs to be exceeded before an effect on mood occurs. Some indirect evidence supports this hypothesis. For instance, in the citalopram-responders study,⁴ total plasma tryptophan reduction was also modest: 44.6% (free levels not reported). Furthermore, Delgado et al¹ found a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.60$) between minimum level of free tryptophan and depression score. Inspection of their Figure 4^{1(p 415)} suggests that a nonlinear relationship is also possible. Ten of 12 patients with free tryptophan levels lower than or equal to 1 $\mu\text{mol/L}$ had a relapse, compared with only 2 of 9 patients with a level greater than 1 $\mu\text{mol/L}$. In the study by Bremner et al,⁵ tryptophan reductions were not statistically different between patients who relapsed and those who did not. However, with the threshold hypothesis in mind, the difference may be clinically significant. The reduction in free plasma tryptophan in the relapse group was 77.9%, compared with 57.5% in the no-relapse group. Finally, a recent study found that a 67% reduction of free tryptophan produced the expected worsening of depressive symptoms, whereas a 34% reduction did not.⁷ These studies⁵ suggest that the hypothesized threshold lies somewhere around a 60% reduction of free plasma tryptophan.⁷ However, it may be that the hypothesized threshold should be defined in terms of the ratio between tryptophan level and large neutral amino acids (because these compete at the blood-brain barrier). In conclusion, the effect of TD on mood in formerly depressed patients may be more consistent than suggested by these negative findings. A reanalysis of large datasets may determine the relative contribution of extent of depletion, medication status, presence of suicidal ideation, and time since remission.

A. J. Willem Van der Does, PhD
Departments of Psychology and Psychiatry
Leiden University
Wassenaarseweg 52
2333 AK Leiden, the Netherlands

1. Delgado PL, Charney DS, Price LH, Aghajanian G, Landis Heninger GR. Serotonin function and the mechanism of antidepressant action. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1990;47:411-418.
2. Smith KA, Fairburn CG, Cowen PJ. Relapse of depression after rapid depletion of tryptophan. *Lancet*. 1997;349:915-919.
3. Moore P, Gillin C, Bhatti T, DeModena A, Seifritz E, Clark C, Stahl S, Rapaport M, Kelsoe J. Rapid tryptophan depletion, sleep electroencephalogram, and mood in men with remitted depression on serotonin inhibitors. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1998;55:534-539.
4. Aberg-Wistedt A, Hasselmark L, Stain-Malmgren R, Aperia B, Kjellman BF, Mathe AA. Serotonergic vulnerability in affective disorder. *Acta Psychiatr Scand*. 1998;97:374-380.
5. Bremner JD, Innis RB, Salomon RM, Staib LH, Ng CK, Miller HL, Bronen RA, Krystal JH, Duncan J, Rich D, Price LH, Malison R, Dey H, Soufer R, Charney DS. Positron emission tomography measurement of cerebral metabolic cor-

relates of tryptophan depletion-induced depressive relapse. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1997;54:364-374.

6. Leyton M, Young SN, Benkelfat C. Relapse of depression after rapid depletion of tryptophan [letter]. *Lancet*. 1997;349:1840-1841.
7. Spillman MK, Van der Does AJW, Rankin MA, et al. Tryptophan depletion in SSRI-recovered depressed outpatients. *Psychopharmacology*. In press.

In reply

Like many investigators, we have wondered why some but not all euthymic depressed patients treated with SSRIs or monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) suffer a clinical relapse following rapid tryptophan depletion (RTD). Many clinical and behavioral measures vary widely between psychiatric patients and healthy volunteers with RTD, although plasma tryptophan reductions tend to be consistent and robust in both groups. Numerous attempts to correlate changes in plasma tryptophan scores with changes in depression scores or other measures have often failed to indicate a significant relationship.¹⁻¹⁰

Dr Van der Does points out our lack of mood findings and smaller plasma tryptophan depletions compared with other reports.^{2,11} These findings may be attributable to our depleting tryptophan in the afternoon and evening hours, when plasma tryptophan levels tend to peak,¹² and this may have had a blunting effect on plasma tryptophan depletion. However, even with these comparatively smaller depletions, each of the 10 remitted depressed patients treated with SSRIs showed significant effects on REM (rapid eye movement) sleep measures following both strengths (25 g and 100 g) of a tryptophan-depleting mixture. Therefore, although RTD did not induce depressive relapse in our patients, it did have measurable central nervous system effects consistent with depletion of serotonin. Similarly, in MAOI-treated depressed patients, RTD reversed the MAOI-induced suppression of REM sleep without depressive relapse.¹³ Euthymic patients receiving SSRIs or MAOIs are more vulnerable to RTD-induced relapse early in treatment when they are in partial remission (Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression score, approximately 8-10 at 4-6 weeks) than later in treatment when they are in full remission (Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression score, approximately 3 at around 5 months).

How should depressive relapse be defined? According to the criteria of Delgado et al,¹⁰ a 50% increase in Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression score constitutes relapse. Our remitted patients, for example, increased from 2 points to 3 (a 50% increase) on a modified Hamilton Rating Scale for Depression following RTD, but does this truly reflect clinical relapse? In our studies of depressed patients and normal volunteers, RTD elicited changes such as increased Confusion and decreased Vigor, Elation, and Friendliness in Profile of Mood States subscales. Whether the gap between these changes and depressive relapse is simply a matter of degree remains to be seen. Based on the literature and our own experience, we believe that true depressive relapse induced by RTD in SSRI and MAOI euthymia needs to be verified by other groups.

In contrast to our REM sleep findings in SSRI and MAOI-treated depressed patients, the RTD-induced REM sleep effects are less consistent in healthy volunteers,^{1,2,14} despite consistent depletion of plasma tryptophan. In our re-examination of the data, the RTD-induced REM sleep measures in healthy volunteers show an almost dichotomous

effect: either a very pronounced REM-disinhibiting effect (such as an occurrence of sleep-onset REM) or virtually no effect. In this regard, we agree with Dr Van der Does regarding the notion of a "threshold" effect with RTD, but posit that it is not based in plasma, but located more centrally, such as in neuronal pools of serotonin.

P. J. Moore, PhD
J. C. Gillin, MD
H. P. Landolt, PhD
Mark Rapaport, MD
John Kelsoe, MD
Department of Psychiatry
University of California at San Diego (UCSD)
UCSD Mental Health Clinical Research Center
VA San Diego Healthcare System
3350 La Jolla Village Dr
San Diego, CA 92161

This study was supported by grant MOI RR00827 from the UCSD General Clinical Research Center, San Diego, Calif, grants MH 57134-01 and MH 18825 from the National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, Md; grant MH 30914 from the UCSD Mental Health Clinical Research Center, San Diego, Calif; and the Stanley Foundation, Bethesda, Md.

1. Bhatti T, Gillin JC, Seifritz E, Moore P, Clark C, Golshan S, Stahl S, Rapaport M, Kelsoe J. Effects of a tryptophan-free amino acid drink challenge on normal human sleep EEG and mood. *Biol Psychiatry*. 1998;43:52-59.
2. Moore P, Gillin JC, Bhatti T, DeModena A, Seifritz E, Clark C, Stahl S, Rapaport M, Kelsoe J. Rapid tryptophan depletion, sleep electroencephalogram, and mood in men with remitted depression on serotonin inhibitors. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1998;55:534-539.
3. Bremner JD, Innis RB, Salomon RM, Staib LH, Ng CK, Miller HL, Bronen RA, Krystal JH, Duncan J, Rich D, Price LH, Malison R, Dey H, Soufer R, Charney DS. Positron emission tomography correlates of tryptophan depletion induced depressive relapse. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1997;54:364-374.
4. Neumeister A, Praschak-Rieder N, Hesselman B, Rao M-L, Gluck J, Kasper S. Effects of tryptophan depletion on drug-free patients with seasonal affective disorder during a stable response to bright light therapy. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1997;54:133-138.
5. Neumeister A, Praschak-Rieder N, Hesselman B, Vitouch O, Rauh, M, Barocha A, Kasper S. Effects of tryptophan depletion in fully remitted patients with seasonal affective disorder during summer. *Psychological Med* 1998;28: 257-264.
6. Lam RW, Zis AP, Grewal A, Delgado PL, Charney DS, Krystal JH. Effects of rapid tryptophan depletion in patients with seasonal affective disorder in remission after light therapy. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1996;53:41-44.
7. Koszycki D, Zacharcko RM, Le Melleo J-M, Young SN, Bradwejn J. Effects of acute tryptophan depletion on behavioral, cardiovascular and hormonal sensitivity to cholecystokinin-tetrapeptide challenge in healthy volunteers. *Biol Psychiatry*. 1996;40:648-55.
8. Goddard AW, Charney DS, Germaine M, Woods SW, Heninger GR, Krystal JH, Goodman WK, Price LH. Effects of tryptophan depletion on responses to yohimbine in healthy human subjects. *Biol Psychiatry*. 1996;38:74-85.
9. Ellenbogen MA, Young SN, Dean P, Palmour RM, Benkelfat C. Mood response to acute tryptophan depletion in healthy volunteers: sex differences and temporal stability. *Neuropsychopharmacology*. 1996;15:465-474.
10. Moore P, Landholt HP, Seifritz E, Clark C, Bhatti T, Kelsoe J, Rapaport M, Gillin JC. Clinical and physiological consequences of rapid tryptophan depletion. *Neuropsychopharmacology*. In press.
11. Delgado PL, Charney DS, Price LH, Aghajanian G, Landis H, Heninger GR. Serotonin function and the mechanism of antidepressant action. *Arch Gen Psychiatry*. 1990;47:411-418.
12. Wurtman RJ, Rose CM, Chou C, Latin FF. Daily rhythms in the concentrations of various amino acids in human plasma. *N Engl J Med*. 1968;279:171-175.
13. Landolt HP, Schnierow BJ, Kelsoe JR, Rapaport MH, Gillen JC. Phenelzine-induced suppression of REM sleep can be reversed by rapid tryptophan depletion. *Sleep*. 2000;23(suppl 2):A34-A35.
14. Voderholzer U, Hornyak M, Thiel B, Huwig-Poppe C, Kiemen A, Konig A, Backhaus J, Berger M, Hohagen F. Impact of experimentally induced serotonin deficiency by tryptophan depletion on sleep EEG in healthy subjects. *Neuropsychopharmacology*. 1998;18:112-124.

Did Samson Have Antisocial Personality Disorder?

Besides intrinsic, historical, and literary interest, and pedagogical utility, the study of the history of a disease can provide clues to its pathogenesis. It is necessary, but not sufficient, that the cause of disease be at least as old as the disease itself. We note a possible case of antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) nearly 3000 years ago: the biblical figure Samson (Judges,¹ chapters 13-16), son of Manoah.

The DSM-IV requires that 3 of 7 criteria be met for the diagnosis of ASPD. Samson meets 6. (1) Failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behavior: The Philistines tried to arrest Samson after he burned the Philistine fields (15:5) and went to Gaza (16:1). (2) Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying: Samson did not tell his parents that he had killed a lion. Furthermore, he proffered honey for his parents to eat, but did not tell them it had come from the carcass of a lion (14:9) and thus caused them to violate their dietary laws. (3) Impulsivity: His burning of the Philistine fields (15:5). (4) Irritability and aggressiveness: This is indicated by his repeated involvement in physical fights. (5) Reckless disregard for safety of self or others: Samson is reported to have taken on and killed 1000 Philistines single-handedly (15:15). Telling Delilah the secret to his strength (16:17), even after she had attempted 3 times previously to get this secret, can also be considered reckless disregard for safety of self. (6) Lack of remorse: He gloated (15:16) after killing 1000 men.

In addition, Samson committed many of the actions listed in the criteria for conduct disorder—fire setting, cruelty to small animals (15:5), bullying, initiating physical fights, using a weapon (jawbone of ass) (15:15), and stealing from a victim (14:19). If conduct disorder did not start when Samson was younger than 15 years, he was quite young (14:1-6).

Samson shows no evidence of schizophrenia. Some of his behaviors (eg, not telling his parents that the honey had been taken from a carcass) seem to have been done during a nonmanic state.

Samson's conduct was unacceptable in his time—3000 Israelites (Samson's own people!) captured Samson and delivered him to the Philistines (15:12).

Recognition of the diagnosis of ASPD for Samson may help in better understanding the biblical story, and, in general, may help in instances when a leader has ASPD. Also, we hope it stimulates interest in the history of ASPD.

Eric Lewin Altschuler, MD, PhD
Ansar Haroun, MD
Bing Ho, MD
Amy Weimer, MD
School of Medicine and
Institute for Neural Computation
University of California, San Diego
9500 Gilman Dr, 0109
La Jolla, CA 92093-0109