Looking for a way to stay calm and mentally focused during the holiday bustle? Or want a natural way to deal with anxiety year-round? Grab some GABA!

By Jack Challem

THE BASICS: GABA, or gamma-aminobutyric acid, is an amino acid and one of the brain’s chief calming neurotransmitters. Some neurotransmitters, such as adrenaline and dopamine, excite and sometimes overstimulate us. Others, such as GABA and serotonin, have a relaxing effect. GABA can be used by itself or in conjunction with other supplements to reduce anxiety, combat stress, improve mental focus, and promote restful sleep.

ALIAS: The brain can make GABA from either glutamate or L-glutamine, although the conversion to GABA depends on vitamins B3 (niacin), B6, and B12. Glutamate and L-glutamine can have a stimulating effect in some people, so do not take them unless recommended by a nutritionally oriented physician. GABA, however, is perfectly safe.

HOW GABA WORKS: The brain constantly receives a tremendous amount of sensory information. GABA works by helping the brain filter out the nonessentials; this leads to improved mental focus and reduced anxiety.

People with anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, epilepsy, and schizophrenia, often have low levels of GABA. Because their minds do not filter the extraneous, they respond to too much sensory information, giving the impression of being distractible, impulsive, or jumpy. Many anxiety-reducing drugs and sleep-inducing medications work by interacting with GABA receptors on brain cells. These drugs try to imitate how GABA functions, but they are poor substitutes and can cause many undesirable side effects.

HEALTH BENEFITS:
- Reduces Anxiety. Japanese researchers tested the effects of GABA on people with a fear of heights. The subjects walked across a narrow bridge 150 feet above the ground after taking either GABA or a placebo. GABA improved the subjects’ levels of immunoglobulin A (IgA); people who took placebos had low IgA levels, a sign of stress.
- Promotes Relaxation. Researchers in Japan reported that 100 mg of supplemental GABA led to significant increases in the brain’s alpha waves, which reflect feelings of relaxation.
- Other Potential Benefits. Low GABA activities are associated with depression or insomnia; supplements may be worth a try.

BACKGROUND CHECK: L-theanine, an amino acid found in green tea, boosts GABA levels. Magnesium and L-taurine also stimulate GABA production. N-acetylcysteine, an antioxidant, may also improve GABA activity.

GLEANINGS: GABA’s benefits may be increased when combined with a B-complex supplement.

HEADS UP: The market for GABA supplements seems to be heating up, largely because so many people feel stressed and have trouble sleeping.

WHAT YOU SHOULD TAKE: You can take 200 mg of GABA up to three times per day. It can also be combined with 100 to 200 mg of L-theanine and B-complex vitamins.