



St John's wort as a depression treatment

Fact Sheet

What this fact sheet covers:

- What is St John's wort?
- Is St John's wort effective as a depression treatment?
- Side effects and purity of St John's wort
- Does St John's wort affect other medications?
- How does it work?
- Dosage
- Key points to remember
- Further information.

What is St John's wort?

St John's wort (*hypericum perforatum*) is a perennial herb with a yellow flower that has been used to treat nervous conditions since ancient Greek times. Today, it is a popular herbal remedy for mild depression. The plant has many chemical compounds, some of which are believed to help depression by preventing nerve cells in the brain from reabsorbing the chemical messenger *serotonin*, or by reducing levels of a protein involved in the body's immune system functioning. Most preparations have been standardised to include the main active ingredients of *hypericin* and *hyperforin*.

It's important to note that, while St John's wort is a herb, it is still an active treatment that has specific chemical effects.

Is St John's wort effective as a depression treatment?

There have been many clinical studies comparing the effectiveness of St John's wort with placebos and antidepressant medication. Most have found the herbal remedy to be superior to placebo and equivalent to standard antidepressants for the treatment of **mild to moderate depression**.

However, for the treatment of melancholic (biological) depression, it is unlikely to be effective.

In general, St John's wort has been recommended as a useful alternative for those not wanting to take antidepressant medication for the treatment of mild depression. However, in a web survey on the Black Dog Institute website, where nearly 3000 people who had experienced clinical depression evaluated different treatments, St John's wort was rated as distinctly less effective than most formal antidepressant drugs.



What are the side-effects of St John's wort?

The use of St John's wort as a treatment for depression has created some controversy, with clinical trials into its safety and effectiveness constantly under review. Generally, St John's wort is well tolerated when taken on its own. The most common side-effects reported are dry mouth, dizziness, increased sensitivity to sunlight (photosensitivity), gastrointestinal symptoms and fatigue. Its safety in pregnancy has not been clarified.

Purity of the active ingredients

While St John's wort is freely available in Australia, the Therapeutic Goods Administration has warned that the strength of the active ingredients may vary between preparations, and potentially reduce the effectiveness of other medicines. A problem with herbal remedies, compared to manufactured drugs, is that the dose of the active ingredients cannot be precisely controlled.

Does St John's wort affect other medications?

St John's wort is known to adversely interact with some medications. Taken in combination with other drugs, St John's wort can boost the effect of the other drug, which then increases the risk of negative reactions. St John's wort may also impact on the breakdown of other drugs by reducing their concentration levels in the blood and hence their effect.

Contraindications can occur with interactions between St John's wort and antidepressants, HIV medications, transplant drugs, warfarin (a blood thinning agent), some heart medications, anticonvulsants used in the treatment of epilepsy, the contraceptive pill and migraine treatments.

St John's wort should not be used in conjunction with antidepressant medication.

How does it work?

It is thought that St John's wort is a reuptake inhibitor of serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline, which are chemicals in the brain that are linked to depression and anxiety. Recent clinical trials have found that St John's wort was superior to placebo, or as effective as standard antidepressants (for example, *Prozac*, *Tofranil* and *Zoloft*).

Dosage

It is suggested that 900 mg of St John's wort is required to effectively reduce symptoms of non-melancholic depression. As with other antidepressant medication, the herbal remedy may take up to four weeks to become effective.



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Key points to remember

- St John's wort appears to be an effective treatment for mild (non-melancholic) depression.
- It is not advisable to treat people who have significant major depression with St John's wort, given the risks associated with ineffective treatment.
- Because of problems with adverse drug reactions, St John's wort may not be suitable for everyone.
- **St John's wort should not be taken in combination with other prescription drugs, including antidepressants. If you are taking other medication, always check with your GP first.**

Further Information

- See the rest of our fact sheets or watch our online Depression Education Program (DepEd) www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
- www.healthinsite.com
- Journal article: Lawvere, S. and Mahoney, M. (2005) St John's Wort, *American Family Physician*, Volume 27, Number 11.
- Jorm, A., Christensen, H., Griffiths, K., Korten, A. and Rodgers, B. (2001). *Help for Depression – what works (and what doesn't)*, Centre for Mental Health Research, Canberra.

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