

Herbs

St. John's Wort

Hypericum perforatum

What are the folklore uses of St. John's wort?

St. John's wort has been used in the past as a blood purifier, in easing tumors and boils, in chronic uterine problems, and to correct irregular menstruation. None of these uses is appropriate for St. John's wort.

What is St. John's wort?

The herb produces golden yellow flowers which, with the leaves, appear to have a medicinal effect.

What are its proposed medicinal uses?

It is primarily used as an antidepressant. It also has been used to reduce diarrhea, pain, and high fever. It can be a diuretic, and has been used in the treatment of conditions ranging from insomnia to gastritis. St. John's wort also is applied externally to relieve inflammation, promote healing, and as a treatment for hemorrhoids.

How effective is St. John's wort?

In Germany, it is prescribed as a treatment for mild and moderate depression, anxiety, and nervousness. A large trial experiment is being planned to identify effectiveness, detect side effects, and assess long-term results. It appears more effective for those who are mildly or moderately depressed. Its use is discouraged for individuals with severe depression.

How does St. John's wort appear to work as an antidepressant?

Serotonin, a neurotransmitter in the brain, acts to elevate a person's mood. Depression sets in

when there is not enough serotonin. While the way in which St. John's wort works is not clearly understood, its active compound, hypericin, appears to maintain adequate levels of serotonin and mood-boosting norepinephrine by blocking

the action of the MOA (monoamine oxidase) enzyme. Overactivity of the MOA enzyme can result in depression.

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

Research suggests that it has fewer side effects than other antidepressant medications. Although as few as 1 percent of users have reported side effects, their symptoms include gastrointestinal disturbances, allergic reactions, and fatigue. Hypericin is known to induce sensitivity to the sun.

Because St. John's wort's effects are similar to those of an MAO inhibitor, it may have some additional side effects. There is a risk of hypertension if it is taken with food that contains the natural chemical tyramine, found in beer on tap, red wine, liquors, aged meat and cheese, yeast extract, and soy sauces. Check with a physician before using St. John's wort, especially if you take medication for hypertension.

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What precautions should be considered?

St. John's wort is not necessarily a better or safer way to treat depression. Over-the-counter remedies for depression may encourage self-diagnosis, which can be harmful; other conditions can appear to be depression. While there have



been no deaths reported from an overdose of St. John's wort, there have been documented cases of fatal overdoses of antidepressants.

What are recommended forms and dosages of St. John's wort?

If you and your doctor decide St. John's wort might be effective for you, look for products that list one to two milligrams of hypericin daily, prepared from whole crude extracts, preferably harvested at the blooming stage. Whole plant extracts may increase the likelihood that the product is rich in flavonoids, a compound that may prove to be an even more active compound than hypericin. Liquid extracts should be deep burgundy red in color and cloudy, not clear. If the liquid is brown, it is probably oxidized, rendering it ineffective.

It can take up to four weeks for St. John's wort to be effective. If it has not helped within that period, it probably is not going to work. Consult your physician if depression persists.

Conclusion

Before using St. John's wort, discuss it with your physician to make sure it is safe for you, and that it will not affect other medications. St. John's wort is advised only for mild to moderate depression symptoms. It should not be used with other antidepressants, nor should it be substituted for similar prescribed drugs without the approval of a physician. Be alert for signs of depression, such as withdrawal from daily activities, sleeping changes, or thoughts of suicide. Contact a physician if such symptoms are noticed.

Sources:

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