

# St John's Wort (Hypericum)

St John's wort is a herbal antidepressant that you can buy from pharmacies without a prescription. However, many doctors do not advise that you take this as it can cause serious side-effects in some people, and should not be used in certain situations (detailed below).

## What is St John's wort?

St John's wort (hypericum) is a short, yellow-flowering, wild-growing plant. It has been used for centuries as a medicinal herb. Extracts of St John's wort are made into capsules and other types of preparations which are used to treat depression. It recently became a popular treatment for depression.

## How does St John's wort work?

St John's wort contains many different chemicals. Some are thought to be the active ingredients. How these chemicals actually work in the body is not clear. It is thought that they may alter the balance of some of the chemicals in the brain (neurotransmitters) such as serotonin, dopamine, gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA), and noradrenaline. Alterations in the balance of these neurotransmitters are thought to play some part in causing depression.

## Antidepressants and depression

Sometimes a life problem such as bereavement, redundancy, illness, etc, may trigger a depression. Sometimes there is no apparent cause for a depression. However, antidepressants such as St John's wort treat the symptoms of depression, whatever the cause.

Symptoms of depression include: low mood, feelings of sadness, sleep problems, poor appetite, irritability, poor concentration, decreased sex drive, loss of energy, guilt feelings, headaches, aches, pains, and palpitations. If symptoms are eased, you not only feel better, but you may also be able to cope better with any problems or difficult circumstances.

## How effective is St John's wort?

It is not clear how well St John's wort works in depression.

- A review of clinical trials up to 1998 found that St John's wort was more effective than dummy tablets (placebo) for the short-term treatment of mild to moderate depression. However, the review was unable to confirm if it was as effective as standard prescription antidepressants.

- Other more recent studies have reported mixed findings. Two clinical trials found St John's wort to be just as effective as full dose imipramine (a commonly prescribed antidepressant). However, another trial failed to show any benefit.

So, St John's wort may have some effect for mild depression. However, it is probably not appropriate to try it if you have moderate or severe depression. Generally, you should see a doctor for advice on treatment if you have moderate or severe depression.

### **How quickly does St John's wort work?**

Like prescription antidepressants, it takes 2-4 weeks for the effect of St John's wort to build up fully.

### **Are there any side-effects or risks when taking St John's wort?**

Some people think that because St John's wort is 'natural' then it is totally safe. This is not true as it contains many chemicals which sometimes cause problems.

#### **Possible side-effects**

The most common side-effects are dry mouth, dizziness, gut symptoms, increased sensitivity to sunlight, and tiredness.

#### **Possible risks**

St John's wort sometimes reacts with other medicines. So:

- You should not take it if you are taking warfarin, cyclosporin, oral contraceptives, anticonvulsants, digoxin, theophylline, or certain anti-HIV. This is because it may reduce the effect of these medicines.
- You should not take it at the same time as taking an SSRI antidepressant (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) or a triptan medicines used for migraine (such as sumatriptan). This is because it has an additive effect to these medicines which can cause problems.

Also, you should not take St John's wort if you are pregnant or breastfeeding as it has not been proved to be safe in these situations.

Because of the uncertain effectiveness, possible side-effects, and possible interactions with other medicines, many doctors now do not recommend that St John's wort should be used. Also, if you have depression, it is generally best that you see a doctor who can advise on treatments and monitor your progress.