

making sense



St John's wort

Making sense of St John's wort

This information is for anyone taking or considering taking St John's wort, their friends and family, and for anyone with an interest in it.

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What is St John's wort?

St John's wort is a herbal medicine that is used to treat symptoms of mental health problems. These include mild and moderate depression (for example seasonal affective disorder, SAD), mild anxiety and sleep problems. (See Mind's booklets *Understanding depression*, *Understanding seasonal affective disorder*, *Understanding anxiety and panic attacks* and *How to cope with sleep problems* for more information.)

The botanical name for St John's wort is *Hypericum perforatum*, and it is sometimes marketed and sold as 'Hypericum'.

It contains the active ingredients hypericin and hyperforin, as well as other substances present in the plant. Hypericin is the ingredient used to treat depression, and hyperforin has antibiotic properties.

●● *I took a lot of different prescription medication when diagnosed with a mental health condition and experienced severe side effects and withdrawal problems. I am much better now but I still experience periods of anxiety and low mood and St John's wort helps me to cope.* ●●

How does St John's wort work?

Research suggests that St John's wort works in a similar manner to standard antidepressants, but with far fewer reported side effects.

Depending on the herbal composition of the product used, St John's wort may take effect more quickly than prescribed antidepressants. (See Mind's booklet *Making sense of antidepressants* for more information.)

In addition to hypericin and hyperforin, the plant contains many other substances that may contribute to its antidepressant activity in ways that are not yet understood.

Is St John's wort a licensed medication?

St John's wort products are licensed by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) (see 'Useful contacts' on p.10). This organisation is responsible for licensing medicines in the UK under the Traditional Herbal Medicine scheme. Under this scheme, registration is based on the long-standing use of a plant as a traditional herbal medicine, and is not based on clinical trials.

Licensed St John's wort products may be marked with the registration mark shown here.



This indicates that the herbal medicine is safe to an acceptable standard, provided it is used according to the instructions on the packaging. The product should also have a registration number, starting with the letters 'THR'.

Can I get St John's wort on prescription?

St John's wort is available on prescription in many European countries. However, doctors in England and Wales do not normally write prescriptions for it.

This is because the use of St John's wort is not recommended by the British National Formulary (the main drug reference book used by health professionals) or by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). It is also not supported by NHS funding in many areas.

You can buy St John's wort over the counter, and if your doctor were to suggest you try it, you would usually have to buy it yourself. It is readily available in many health food shops and pharmacies.

Form and dose

How do you take St John's wort?

St John's wort can be taken as tablets and capsules. You can also get it as a tea, and as a liquid called a tincture, which you can take as drops in water.

There are additional products available that combine St John's wort with other herbs, such as lemon balm (*Melissa officianalis*) and hops (*Humulus lupulus*). These products are designed for people with depression who have difficulty sleeping.

👤👤 *I found that just taking the tea form of St John's wort was very helpful for me in alleviating the symptoms of depression... I think it might depend on the individual as to what form of the herb helps best and the dose.* 👤👤

What dosage should I take?

You can get different dosages of St John's wort, depending on the form and brand that you buy. The dosage of St John's wort is not standardised in the UK.

You need to read the packaging carefully to see how strong the product is and what dose you should be taking.

The packaging will usually tell you how strong the product is by describing the amount of hypericin or hypericum extract. The suggested dosage is 200mg to 1000mg of 0.3 per cent standardised hypericum extract per day, which is usually taken in two or three doses.

However, some products refer to the amount of St John's wort as 'aerial parts'. This means the parts of the plant that grow above the ground.

It's easiest to be sure of the dosage if you take St John's wort in tablet or capsule form and stick to one particular brand. Be aware that if you buy a different type or brand, the dosage may be different.

Cautions and side effects

Is it always safe to take St John's wort?

Many people believe that as herbal remedies are natural, they are completely safe and free of side effects. This is not the case. Many herbs are poisonous if used in the wrong way, and many standard medicines are derived from herbs. Most herbal remedies have fewer adverse effects than standard medicines, but they all need to be used with care.

You should be cautious about taking St John's wort if you have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder because, as with all antidepressants, it has been known to cause hypomania, or rapid switching from a low to a high mood. (See Mind's online booklet *Understanding hypomania and mania* for more information.)

You should get advice from a herbalist or pharmacist about taking St John's wort if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, because there is no information on its safety in these situations.

There is also no information about its safety for children under the age of 18.

What are the side effects?

Some people get side effects when they take St John's wort, but many do not. There are no statistics on how common the side effects are.

The most commonly reported side effects include:

- symptoms affecting your stomach and digestion such as feeling sick, being sick or diarrhoea
- headaches
- allergic reactions
- tiredness
- dizziness
- confusion.

Some people get a dry mouth.

A rare side effect is increased sensitivity to sunlight. If you think this is affecting you, you should consider using a high factor sunscreen, cover up or stay out of the sun. You should also be cautious about taking St John's wort if you use a lamp box for seasonal affective disorder. (See Mind's booklet, *Understanding seasonal affective disorder* for more information.)

If you get any side effects which you think should be reported, you can report them to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) using their Yellow Card system (see 'Useful contacts' on p.10).

Interactions with other medicines

Can I take St John's wort with other medicines?

St John's wort has significant interactions with a large number of medicines which are in common use. This means that it may affect the levels of some other drugs in the body. This could make the other drugs less effective, or increase the chances of adverse effects. These drugs include both prescribed drugs and medicines you can buy for yourself over the counter.

Because of this, it is very important that you get professional advice from a pharmacist, medical herbalist or doctor before taking St John's wort at the same time as any other medicine.

The following are common drug interactions with St John's wort:

- You should not take St John's wort at the same time as any other antidepressant.
- St John's wort may prolong the effects of some sleeping pills and anaesthetics. If you are taking St John's wort and are to receive an anaesthetic, you should inform the anaesthetist.
- St John's wort reduces the level of oral contraceptives in your blood and makes them less effective, increasing the risk of pregnancy and breakthrough bleeding.

Withdrawal

Will I get withdrawal symptoms when I stop taking St John's wort?

As with other medications, some people stop taking St John's wort without any problems at all, while others experience withdrawal symptoms. Information on withdrawal symptoms is anecdotal and inconsistent. Some people have reported feeling sick, dizzy and tense when they stopped taking St John's wort abruptly.

As St John's wort has similar properties to prescribed antidepressants, it is advisable to slowly reduce your dosage so as to lessen the chance of withdrawal symptoms, especially if you have been taking it for longer than a few weeks.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday 9am to 6pm)
email: info@mind.org.uk
web: mind.org.uk
Details of local Minds and other local services, and Mind's Legal Advice Line. Language Line is available for talking in a language other than English.

British Herbal Medicine Association

tel: 0845 680 1134
web: bhma.info
Advice about herbal medicines.

Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA)

web: mhra.gov.uk
Information about herbal medicines registration and registered products. Visit yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk to report side effects and withdrawal effects.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

tel: 0845 003 7780
web: nice.org.uk
Guidance on health and social care.

The National Institute of Medical Herbalists

tel: 01392 426 022
web: nimh.org.uk
Provides a list of NIMH members.

Further information

Mind offers a range of mental health information on:

- diagnoses
- treatments
- practical help for wellbeing
- mental health legislation
- where to get help

To read or print Mind's information booklets for free, visit mind.org.uk or contact Mind Infoline on 0300 123 3393 or at info@mind.org.uk

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Mind

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