



An evidence-based review of alternative therapies

St. John's Wort

An Alternative for Depression

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Hypericum or St. John's Wort has been shown to be useful in mild to moderate depression. Results are comparable to those with tricyclic antidepressants and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), but with fewer reported side-effects.¹⁻⁴

It is best to use a standardized extract at a dose of 300 mg three times daily; however, there are reports of using up to 1,700 mg/day in resistant cases. The therapeutic effect depends on its hyperforin and hypericin content.

Like most prescription drugs, St. John's Wort has a delayed effect; it can take between two and four weeks before any clinical improvement in mood disorder is evident.

St. John's Wort can sometimes cause:

- drowsiness,
- photosensitivity,
- gastrointestinal upset,
- restlessness,
- confusion and
- skin rashes.

There have also been reports this herb may exacerbate psychosis in patients with schizophrenia, induce mania and hypomania and cause serotonin syndrome.

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Why choose St. John's Wort over tricyclics or SSRIs?

1. Cost is quite low and many patients without drug plans find it affordable.
2. Some patients with depression are afraid of taking drugs. They worry about side-effects or don't want to put anything "unnatural" into their system.
3. Since St. John's Wort can be bought at health food stores without a prescription, some patients feel they have more control over what they are taking.
4. There are lower dropout rates than with prescription drugs; in 3,250 patients only 2.4% reported adverse effects.

Possible drug interactions with St. John's Wort

St. John's Wort may interfere with the cytochrome P450 isoenzymes. It decreases all of the following drugs:

- Digoxin
- Indinavir (HIV disease)
- Cyclosporin (heart transplant rejects)
- Oral contraceptives
- Theophylline
- Warfarin (decreased international normalized ratio)
- Simvastatin
- Antiepileptics

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Two recent clinical trials have shown St. John's Wort is not effective in the management of severe depression (defined as scoring 20 or greater on the Hamilton Depression Scale) Currently, it is only recommended for mild to moderate depression.

There are preliminary trials which show St. John's Wort may also be helpful for:


- obsessive compulsive disorders,
- somatoform disorders,
- seasonal affective disorders and
- adverse symptoms of menopause.

What are the pitfalls of self-medication?

With self-medication, patients may undertreat their condition or change the dosage, depending on how they feel on any given day. They are more apt to stop

the medication once they start feeling better. It is important to reiterate they must take an adequate dose for at least four weeks before any judgements can be made about efficacy.

If patients are self-medicating, it would be helpful to see them frequently.

There are no good, long-term studies to ensure the safety of St. John's Wort over time. It can only be assumed patients must stay on the herb for about nine to twelve months to avoid relapse. 

References

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