

St. John's wort

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General Store

Side Effects | Picture of St. John's wort

St. John's wort is a bushy perennial plant with numerous yellow flowers. It is native to many parts of the world including Europe and the United States. It is a wild growing plant in northern California, southern Oregon and Colorado.

The plant has been used as an herbal remedy since the Middle Ages. Many believed it to have magical powers to protect one from evil. Early Christian mystics named the plant after John the Baptist and is traditionally collected on St. John's Day, June 25, soaked in olive oil for days to produce a blood red anointing oil known as the "blood of Christ."

It has a 2,400-year history of safe and effective usage in many folk and herbal remedies. Historically used as a nerve tonic, St. John's wort is now widely used as a mild antidepressant. It is a potent antiviral and antibacterial that is being investigated as a treatment for AIDS.

One of the best herbs for mood elevation is St. John's wort. Several controlled studies have shown positive results in treating patients with mild to moderate depression. Improvement was shown with symptoms of sadness, helplessness, hopelessness, anxiety, headache and exhaustion with no reported side effects.

Its action is based on the ability of the active ingredient, hypericin to inhibit the breakdown of neurotransmitters in the brain. The herb also inhibits monoamine oxidase (MAO) and works as a serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SRI); both are actions similar to drugs prescribed for depression. In Germany, nearly half of depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders are treated with hypericin. St. John's wort should not be taken with any other antidepressants, it is not effective for severe depression, and no one should stop taking any prescribed medications for depression without proper medical care.

St. John's wort has been administered in the treatment of many illnesses. The most well known action of St. John's wort is in repairing nerve damage and reducing pain and inflammation. The herb has been used to relieve menstrual cramping, sciatica, and arthritis. It has a favorable action on the secretion of bile and

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thus soothes the digestive system.

The blossoms have been used in folk medicine to relieve ulcers, gastritis, diarrhea and nausea. St. John's wort can also be effective in the treatment of incontinence and bed-wetting in children. Externally it is used on cuts as a disinfectant and to relieve inflammation and promote healing. The oil can be applied to sprains, bruises and varicose veins. Folk medicine has also used it as a treatment for cancer.

The active constituents in the herb (there are over 50) include hypericin and pseudohypericin, flavonoids, tannins and procyanidins. The tannins are responsible for the astringent effect for wound healing. Hypericin increases capillary blood flow and is a MAO inhibitor.

There are many studies documenting the clinical effects of hypericum as an antidepressant treatment similar to several synthetic antidepressants, but with a minimum of side effects. Hypericin has been demonstrated to increase theta waves in the brain. Theta waves normally occur during sleep and have been associated with deep meditation, serene pleasure and heightened creative activity. St. John's wort effectually may improve perception and clarify thinking processes.

There have been incidences of photosensitization as a side effect in animals. Anyone who is hypersensitive to sunlight or is taking other photosensitizing drugs should be cautious.

Parts Used: Herb tops and flowers. Used as a tea, extract, oil and in tablet form.

Common Use: St. John's wort has been used traditionally as an herbal treatment for anxiety and depression. It is an effective astringent that promotes wound healing and has antiviral properties that can counter herpes simplex, flu viruses and is being investigated as a treatment for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Note: If you are pregnant or lactating or taking anti-depressants like Prozac, check with your physician before taking St. John's wort.

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