

Published by

HEALTHY CHOICES FOR MIND AND BODY

Written by Ann Gerhardt, MD

ST. JOHN'S WORT (*Hypericum perforatum*) by Ann Gerhardt, MD (*Request a subscription via algerhardt@sbcglobal.net, or P.O.Box 19274, Sacramento, CA 95819. Reprints permissible only if the entire pages are kept intact.*)
(08/2005)

Bottom line at the top: St. John's Wort is a good herbal agent for mild to moderate depression, but problematic to use when taking other medications or having surgery, because it affects drug metabolism. Tell your doctor you are taking it, because it acts and interacts like a drug. Due to lack of regulatory oversight, the purity, safety and content of each preparation is not assured.

St. John's Wort, also known as goat weed, hardhay, and klamathweed, has been used for many medical problems, but today is marketed and used almost exclusively as an **herbal antidepressant**. Numerous well controlled, randomized trials prove that St. John's Wort works better than placebo for mild to moderate depression.

There are **multiple active chemical components** in St. John's Wort, with a variety of pharmacologic activities. These activities are characteristic of each of the major classes of prescription antidepressants and other drugs active in the nervous system. St. John's Wort weakly inhibits reuptake of norepinephrine (like Elavyl and Pamelor), serotonin (like Prozac, Lexapro and Paxil), and dopamine (like Zoloft and the newer antipsychotic drugs). It binds GABA-A and -B receptors (like Depakote and other medications which prevent convulsions). The herb mildly inhibits monoamine oxidase (like Parnate and Nardil, two of the older, more dangerous anti-depressant agents).

St. John's Wort's chief benefit may actually lie in its multiple modes of activity, which probably complement each other. Together they relieve depression, but it seems that no one effect is strong enough to cause adverse effects.

The major downside is that St. John's Wort activates the body's systems that degrade or bind other medications, reducing their effectiveness. Some of the affected drugs are oral contraceptives, cardiac medications, drugs to prevent rejection in transplant patients, anti-AIDS drugs and antibiotics. These medications are not ones that you would want to fail to work properly.

Other than drug interactions, the herb has **few side effects**. It rarely causes sun sensitivity, producing a rash, or it may bring out manic tendencies (emotional or mental frenzy) in predisposed individuals. Do not use with other antidepressants, because of overlapping activity, without supervision by a physician.

Approximately 900 mg of extract daily, standardized to 0.3% hypericin content, was studied in most clinical trials. The effects takes 2-3 weeks to appear.

As with any herbal product, no regulatory agency oversees the companies that process and sell St. John's Wort. The purity, safety and content of each herbal pill are not guaranteed. Different companies' products are not necessarily comparable and should not be indiscriminately interchanged.