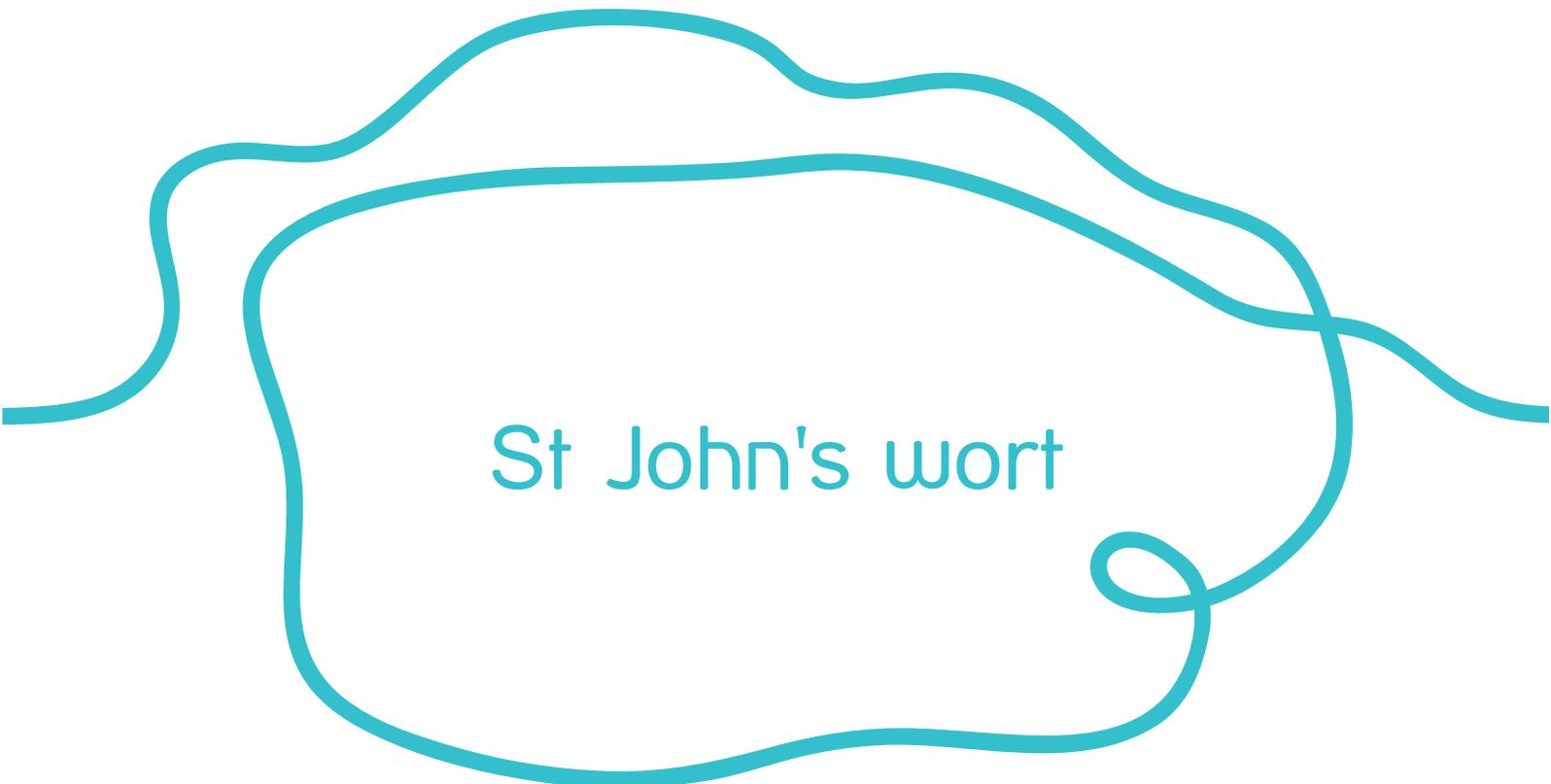


making sense



St John's wort

Making sense of St John's wort

This booklet explains what St John's wort is used for, how it works, possible side effects and interactions with other medicines.

Contents

What is St John's wort?	4
Is St John's wort a licensed medication?	5
What dosage should I take?	7
Can I take St John's wort with other medication?	8
Is it safe to take St John's wort?	9
Useful contacts	12

What is St John's wort?

St John's wort is a herbal remedy that has been used for hundreds of years to treat mental health problems. Today it is mainly used as an over the counter remedy to treat mild and moderate depression, seasonal affective disorder (SAD), mild anxiety and sleep problems.

The botanical name for St John's wort is *Hypericum perforatum*, and it is sometimes marketed and sold as 'Hypericum'. It contains the ingredients hypericin and hyperforin, that have been used for their antidepressant properties.

How does St John's wort work?

It is thought that St John's wort works in a similar way to standard antidepressant medication. Research suggests that it increases the activity of brain chemicals such as serotonin and noradrenaline that are thought to play an important part in regulating our mood.

As well as hypericin and hyperforin, the plant contains many other substances that may boost its antidepressant activity in ways that are not yet fully understood.

Can St John's wort help me?

If you experience depression or low mood, you may decide to try St John's wort as a herbal alternative to antidepressants. However, it is important that you do not use St John's wort instead of seeking help from your GP. If you have any worries about your mental health and are unsure about treatment options, it is always good to talk this through with your doctor.

💡💡 *When I could no longer take SSRI's due to side-effects, I tried St John's wort as an alternative. It has definitely helped with my depression and my mood has lifted quite a lot.* 💡💡

Some people say that they find St John's wort useful in helping to manage their depression but others can experience side effects or feel no benefit from taking it.

Research suggests that, in some cases, St John's wort might be just as effective as some antidepressant drugs to treat mild or moderate depression. It may also cause fewer or less intense side effects than commonly prescribed antidepressants. However, for severe depression the evidence to show that it could help is limited.

If you are thinking about taking St John's wort to treat other mental health problems, such as anxiety or seasonal affective disorder, it is worth noting that there is very little existing evidence on how effective it can be.

“I found that St John's wort lifted my mood so I wasn't waking up at five every morning, life seemed more bearable, I saw colour.”

Speak to your doctor first about taking St John's wort if you:

- are pregnant or are breast feeding – there is limited information on its safety
- have a diagnosis of bipolar disorder – as with all antidepressants, it has been known to cause hypomania, or rapid switching from a low to a high mood. (See our information on hypomania and mania.)
- are under 18 – there is limited information on its safety
- are currently taking prescribed medication, contraceptive medication or common over the counter medications. See our page on interactions with medication.

Is St John's wort a licensed medication?

St John's wort products are licensed by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). This organisation is responsible for

Making sense of St John's wort

licensing herbal medicines in the UK under the Traditional Herbal Medicines Registration 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 should 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, the use of St John's wort is not currently recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) so doctors in England and Wales do not normally write prescriptions for it.

This is because of uncertainty about appropriate doses, variations in preparations and the potentially dangerous interactions that it has with other commonly used medications. See our information on interactions with medication.

Although doctors are advised not to prescribe St John's wort, you can buy it over the counter. It is readily available in pharmacies and in many health food shops.

What dosage should I take?

St John's wort is sold in a variety of different forms. It is most commonly sold 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.

“My mum used to send the [St John's wort] teabags as part of a care package. They did not stop me seeking help when I returned and I don't know if they helped but I felt like I was trying something.”

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 and it's not currently clear what dosage works best.

It's easiest to keep track of what dose you're taking 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.

“I have to admit my experience of St John's wort has been a bit negative. As it's a herbal medicine, you're never too sure if you're taking the right dose.”

If you are considering taking St John's wort, you may find it helpful to talk to your doctor or pharmacist first to discuss what dosage would be best for you and check that taking St John's wort will not interact dangerously with any other medications you are taking.

Before deciding what dose to take, read the packaging carefully and consider:

- **how strong the product is** – the packaging should give you an indication of this by describing the amount of hypericin or hypericum extract

- **how many times you should take the product each day** – the tablets and capsules typically range from 1-3 times a day, depending on their strength.

On the packaging of some products it might refer to the amount of St John's wort as 'aerial parts'. This just means the parts of the plant that grow above the ground.

“It's a good stop-gap solution to make you feel that you are doing something to take control of depression however I've found the knock on effects of missing a dose to be worse than that of SSRIs.”

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

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 way that the body processes other medications which may make them less effective, or increase the chances of adverse effects. These medications include both prescribed drugs and medicines that you can buy for yourself over the counter.

Why might I need advice if I'm taking other medication?

If you are considering taking or are already taking St John's wort with any other prescription or over the counter medications, it is really important to get professional advice from a pharmacist or your doctor.

They will be able to talk to you about any possible interactions St John's wort may have with your medications and discuss alternative treatments or dosages.

These are some of the common drug interactions with St John's wort:

- **Antidepressants** – you should not take St John's wort at the same time as any other antidepressant. Combining the two medications can make your depression worse and can lead to serotonin syndrome.
- **Sleeping pills and anaesthetics** – 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 a general or local anaesthetic, you should inform the anaesthetist.
- **Contraceptives (including emergency contraception)** – St John's wort can reduce the level of contraceptives in the blood and make them less effective, increasing the risk of pregnancy and breakthrough bleeding.

Other medications identified include antipsychotics, anticoagulants to thin the blood and immunosuppressants to prevent the body from rejecting a transplanted organ. It can also reduce the effectiveness of common medications to treat cholesterol, heart disease, high blood pressure, migranes, epilepsy, cancer, hepatitis C, HIV and AIDS.

For a more detailed list of known medications that interact with St John's wort, you can visit the NICE website (evidence.nhs.co.uk).

Is it safe to take St John's wort?

Even though herbal remedies are natural, they are not always safe and free of side effects. It is really important to think about this if you are already taking any other medication (see our information on interactions).

What are the side effects of St John's wort?

Some people who take St John's wort do not report any side effects.

However, those who do have side effects most commonly report:

- feeling nauseous, being sick or diarrhoea
- headaches
- allergic reactions
- tiredness
- dizziness
- confusion
- a dry mouth
- skin problems

Some research shows that individuals who take St John's wort report fewer or less adverse side effects than commonly prescribed antidepressant medications. However, just because many people experience fewer side effects, that doesn't mean that you will have the same experience. It is always important to be aware of any potential risks when taking medication that has not been prescribed by your GP.

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.

“I had no side effects other than some photosensitivity and no withdrawal symptoms. Usually I am very side effect-sensitive so this was a great benefit.”

If you experience any side effects which you think should be reported, you can report them to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) via their Yellow Card system (yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk).

Will I get withdrawal symptoms from stopping?

Some people stop taking St John's wort without any problems, while

others experience withdrawal symptoms. Unfortunately information about withdrawal symptoms is limited and inconsistent.

Those who do experience withdrawal symptoms tend to report feeling sick, dizzy and tense when they stop taking St John's wort suddenly.

As St John's wort has similar properties to prescribed antidepressants, it is advisable to **slowly reduce your dosage** to lessen the chance of withdrawal symptoms, especially if you have been taking it for longer than a few weeks. If you are thinking about stopping taking St John's wort, it can be really useful to talk to your doctor to discuss the safest methods to withdraw.

Useful contacts

Mind

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393
(Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm)

email: info@mind.org.uk

text: 86463

web: mind.org.uk

Details of local Minds, other local services and Mind's Legal Line.

Language Line is available for languages other than English.

Anxiety UK

0844 477 5774

anxietyuk.org.uk

Support, help and information for those with anxiety disorders.

British Herbal Medicine Association

0845 680 1134

bhma.info

Advice about herbal medicines.

Depression UK

depressionuk.org

A self-help organisation made up of individuals and local groups.

Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA)

web: mhra.gov.uk

Licenses drugs for use in the UK.

Runs Yellow Card scheme.

National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

web: nice.org.uk

Publishes evidence-based clinical guidelines on conditions and treatments.

NHS Choices

nhs.uk

Information on health and local services.

Samaritans

Chris, PO Box 9090, Sterling FK8 2SA

helpline: 116 123

jo@samaritans.org

samaritans.org

A 24-hour telephone helpline for people struggling to cope.

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

To buy copies of Mind's information booklets, visit mind.org.uk/shop or phone 0844 448 4448 or email publications@mind.org.uk

This information was written by Lydia Grace

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References available on request
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Providing information costs money. We really value donations, which enable us to get our information to more people who need it.

Just £5 could help another 15 people in need receive essential practical information.

If you would like to support our work with a donation, please contact us on:

tel: 020 8215 2243

email: dons@mind.org.uk

web: mind.org.uk/donate

Mind
(National Association for Mental Health)
15-19 Broadway
London E15 4BQ
tel: 020 8519 2122
fax: 020 8522 1725
web: mind.org.uk

Mind

We're Mind, the mental health charity for England and Wales. We believe no one should have to face a mental health problem alone. We're here for you. Today. Now. We're on your doorstep, on the end of a phone or online. Whether you're stressed, depressed or in crisis. We'll listen, give you advice, support and fight your corner. And we'll push for a better deal and respect for everyone experiencing a mental health problem.

Mind Infoline: 0300 123 3393 / Text: 86463
info@mind.org.uk
mind.org.uk

