

St John's Wort

Why has St John's wort been prescribed?

St John's wort or *Hypericum perforatum* is a herbal antidepressant. St John's wort seems to be effective in mild depression.

Are there any precautions with St John's wort?

St John's wort is suitable for most people. As with all medicines, however, there are precautions. Your prescriber will usually check that it is safe to prescribe St John's wort, but let your prescriber know if any of the following apply to you, as extra care may be needed:

- a) if you have epilepsy or suffer from heart trouble.
- b) if you are taking any other medication for heart disease, HIV medication, theophylline, cyclosporin, oral contraceptive pill or antidepressants. Also, tell your prescriber if you buy any medicine 'over the counter' from a pharmacy or supermarket. Please also tell your prescriber if you take any alternative or complementary medicine such as Chinese herbal medicines.
- c) if you are pregnant or breast feeding or wish to become pregnant.

What is the usual dose of St John's wort?

The exact dose of St John's wort has not been established. It is thought that daily doses containing 900mg of hypericum (the active ingredient) are effective.

How should St John's wort be taken?

St John's wort is usually taken up to three times a day. However, you and your prescriber may decide that it is better for you to take the medicine at another time.

What form does St John's wort come in?

St John's wort is available as capsules, tablets and liquid.

What should be done if a dose is missed?

If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember. If you miss a whole day's dose – just carry on as normal with the usual dose. If you miss more than a day's dose, speak to your prescriber.

What will happen when St John's wort is first taken?

St John's wort, like many medicines, does not work straightaway. For example, it may take several days or even weeks for some symptoms to improve. To begin with, some people find that St John's wort may help them feel more calm and relaxed. Later, (usually in two to three weeks) other symptoms should begin to improve. Unfortunately, some people get side effects before starting to feel better. However, most side effects will lessen and should go away after a few weeks. The table below lists some of the side effects associated with St John's wort. There are other possible side effects – we have listed only the most important ones. Ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse if you are worried about anything else that you think might be a side effect. Further information on side effects may be available in the package leaflet.

Reporting side effects

The 'Yellow Card' scheme encourages patients to report any side effects that they feel may be caused by their medication. Ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse for the forms if you wish to report any side effects. Alternatively, telephone 0800 100 3352 or go to www.mhra.gov.uk.

Summary of side effects

Side effect	How common is it?	What can be done about it?		
Dry mouth	Uncommon	This should wear off within a few days. Sugar-free boiled sweets, chewing gum or eating citrus fruits may help. Report to your prescriber if this persists.		
Nausea	Uncommon	This should wear off within a few days. Consult your prescriber if this persists.		
Constipation	Uncommon	Eat lots of fibre – fruit and vegetables are good sources. Drink plenty of fluids. Your prescriber may prescribe a laxative.		
Dizziness	Uncommon	This should wear off within a few days. Consult your prescriber if this persists.		
Tiredness	Uncommon	This should wear off within a few days. Consult your prescriber if this persists.		
Photosensitivity (increased sensitivity to sunlight)	Uncommon	Avoid over exposure to sunlight (e.g. sunbathing).		
Headache	Uncommon	This should wear off within a few days. Paracetamol can be taken but discuss with your prescriber if this persists.		
Restlessness	Uncommon	This should wear off within a few days. Consult your prescriber if this persists.		
<i>Very common = almost everyone affected</i>	<i>Common = many people affected</i>	<i>Uncommon = some people affected</i>	<i>Rare = few people affected</i>	<i>Very rare = very few people affected</i>

Is St John's wort addictive?

St John's wort is not addictive, but if you stop taking the medicine suddenly, you may experience unpleasant physical feelings.

What about alcohol?

It is recommended that people taking St John's wort should not drink alcohol. This is because both antidepressants and alcohol can cause drowsiness. If the two are taken together, severe drowsiness can result. This can lead to falls and accidents. As well as this, drinking alcohol may make depression and anxiety worse. However, once people are used to taking medication, then very small amounts of alcohol may not be harmful. It pays to be very careful, because alcohol affects people in different ways, especially when they are taking medication. Never drink alcohol and drive. Discuss any concerns you may have with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Is it OK to stop taking St John's wort when symptoms go away?

No. If you stop taking St John's wort your original symptoms are very likely to return. Most people need to remain on St John's wort for at least six months after they have fully recovered. You should always discuss with your prescriber any plans you have to reduce or stop any of your prescribed medicines.

Are there any alternatives to St John's wort?

Yes, there are alternatives available. Although antidepressants have broadly similar therapeutic effects they differ in the side effects they produce. There are more than 20 antidepressants available so most people can find one which suits them. Psychological therapies can also help in some types of depression, either as an alternative to medication or alongside it.

Further information

St John's wort is not formally classified as a medicine. It is available in health food shops and pharmacies. Because it is a herbal medicine little is known about its effects and side effects. St John's wort is probably effective in depression. It seems to have few side effects but this has not been evaluated to the same extent as licensed medicines. Long-term toxicity has not been studied.



Remember, leaflets like this can only describe some of the effects of medication. You may also find other books or leaflets useful. If you have access to the internet you may find a lot of information there as well, but be careful, as internet based information is not always accurate.

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This leaflet is to help you understand more about your medication. It is not an official manufacturer's Patient Information Leaflet (see emc.medicines.org.uk/) For more information, you could contact your local hospital pharmacy – they might have a helpline – or visit www.nwmhp.nhs.uk/pharmacy.

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