



# St John's wort - Hypericum perforatum

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

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## 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](#), and sometimes [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 many active substances, including hypericin and hyperforin, which are thought to affect mood.

## 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 which are thought to play an important part in regulating our mood.

## 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. While you can buy St John's wort from a pharmacy without a prescription, it is best to [seek advice from your GP](#) in the first instance. If you have any worries about your mental health and are unsure about treatment options, it is always useful to talk this through with your doctor before you make a decision.

*"When I could no longer take SSRIs 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."*

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 there is limited evidence to show that it could help. Experiences vary person to person and more research needs to be done.

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 in some people, or rapid switching from a low to a high mood
- are under 18 – there is limited information on its safety
- are currently taking prescribed medication, contraceptive medication (such as the pill) or common over the counter medications. See our page on [interactions with medication](#) for more information.

## Is St John's wort a licensed medication?

Most St John's wort products are licensed by the [Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency \(MHRA\)](#). This organisation is responsible for licensing herbal medicines in the UK under the Traditional Herbal Registration scheme (THR).

Under this scheme, registration is based on the long-standing use of a plant as a traditional herbal medicine, rather than being 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'.

The way herbal medicines are regulated is different to the way pharmaceutical medicines are regulated. Herbal medicines may be unlicensed, and may instead be registered under the THR, which ensures specific standards of safety and quality for the treatment of minor health conditions.

## 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. For more information see our pages on [dosage](#) and [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. The dosages available vary depending on the form and brand that you buy.

It is most commonly sold as tablets and capsules. You can also get it as a tea, or 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."*

All medicines carry levels of risk in different circumstances, and can affect different people in different ways. There is no standard recommended dosage of St John's wort 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 if you stick to one particular brand. Be aware that if you buy a different type or brand, the dosage may be different or cause different [side effects](#).

*"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 a 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 hyperforin extract in the ingredients list or nutritional information section
- **how many times you should take the product each day** – directions should be given on the packaging. Tablets and capsules typically range from 1-3 times per 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 at the same time as any other prescription or over the counter medications, it is really important to get professional advice from your doctor or a pharmacist.

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 could 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 as interacting with St John's wort include:

- [antipsychotics](#)
- anticoagulants to thin the blood
- 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
- migraines
- 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 [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence \(NICE\)](#) website.

## Is it safe to take St John's wort?

Even though herbal remedies are natural, this doesn't mean that they are 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 [St John's wort interactions](#) for more information.

Some research shows that individuals who take St John's wort report fewer or less adverse side effects than commonly prescribed antidepressant medications.

However, all medicines affect different people in different ways, and 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.

## 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.

A rare side effect of St John's wort is increased sensitivity to sunlight. If you think this is affecting you, you should consider using a high factor sunscreen, cover up skin or stay out of the sun as much as possible. It is also best to talk to a doctor before trying [light therapy for seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#), as St John's wort can make your skin more sensitive to light.

*"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 Scheme](#).

## Will I get withdrawal symptoms from stopping?

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.

Some people stop taking St John's wort without any problems, while others experience withdrawal symptoms. Unfortunately, current information about withdrawal symptoms is limited and inconsistent.

Those who do experience withdrawal symptoms tend to report feeling sick, dizzy and tense during the withdrawal period, especially if they stop taking it suddenly without slowly reducing their dose.

# Useful contacts

## Anxiety UK

03444 775 774 (Monday–Friday 9.30am–5.30pm)  
[anxietyuk.org.uk](http://anxietyuk.org.uk)  
Advice and support for people living with anxiety.

## British Herbal Medicine Association

0845 680 1134  
[bhma.info](http://bhma.info)  
Advice about herbal medicines.

## Depression UK

[info@depressionuk.org](mailto:info@depressionuk.org)  
[depressionuk.org](http://depressionuk.org)  
A national self-help organisation that supports people with depression.

## Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA)

020 3080 6000  
[mhra.gov.uk](http://mhra.gov.uk)  
Information about herbal medicines registration and registered products. Visit [yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk](http://yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk) to report side effects and withdrawal effects.

## National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

0300 323 0140  
[nice.org.uk](http://nice.org.uk)  
Information and clinical guidelines on recommended treatments for different conditions.

## NHS

[nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk)  
Information on a wide range of health and social care topics.

If you need help now, but it's not an emergency go to [111.nhs.uk](http://111.nhs.uk) or [call 111](tel:111)

## Samaritans

116 123 (freephone)  
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Stirling FK8 2SA  
24-hour emotional support for anyone struggling to cope.