



# St. John's Wort

*(hypericum perforatum)*

- made from the leaves and flowers of the St. John's wort plant
- comes in liquid extract, tablets, capsules, and oil

## What is it used for?

Studies have shown that St. John's wort may be useful in treating adults with mild to moderate depression. Depression should be diagnosed by your personal physician before taking this supplement. Symptoms of depression may include lack of interest in things you used to enjoy, sadness, loss of appetite, anxiety, or worry.

## How much should I take for mild to moderate depression?

Published studies and reviews suggest the following dosages:

- Take 300 mg tablets or capsules three times a day.
- It may take up to 21 days to notice improvement in your mood.
- Use for longer than six to eight weeks has not been studied.

## Is it safe to take?

There are many drug interactions when taking St. John's wort. It may decrease the effect of prescription medications. It is important to discuss herb use with your health care professional, especially if you take prescription drugs. St. John's wort should not be taken by children. Also see box at right.

## What are the side effects?

Side effects are not common, but may include allergic reactions, dizziness, fatigue, dry mouth, upset stomach, constipation, restlessness, or sleep problems. People with light skin may experience sensitivity to the sun.

If you notice any side effects, stop taking St. John's wort and call your health care professional. You may report side effects directly to the FDA MedWatch at **1-800-FDA-1088** or on the Internet at [www.fda.gov/medwatch](http://www.fda.gov/medwatch).

## Questionable claims

Be aware that some herbal manufacturers make product claims without any proof that their claims are true. It has not been proven that St. John's wort relieves gastritis, insomnia, swelling, hemorrhoids, or skin irritations. Nor has it been proven to heal wounds or be useful in treating children.

## Do not use this supplement if you

- have human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).
- are a transplant patient.
- take medications for heart disease, depression, seizures, or cancer. St. John's wort can decrease the effect of these medications.
- take selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor medicines (SSRIs) such as fluoxetine (Prozac), paroxetine (Paxil), or tricyclic antidepressants such as amitriptyline (Elavil). St. John's wort can cause headache, sweating, dizziness, or a feeling of restlessness if taken with these medications.
- take over-the-counter cold or flu medicines, narcotics (such as codeine), or alcohol.
- take medicines that cause photosensitivity (sensitivity to the sun).
- have a surgery or other procedure scheduled. Some herbs may cause bleeding problems or interfere with anesthesia. Stop taking herbs two weeks before any procedure.
- plan to become pregnant, are pregnant, or are breastfeeding.
- take hormone replacement therapy or oral contraceptives.

# Herbal medicine: safety and quality matter

## Safety issues

In recent years there has been increasing interest in and use of herbal products. Many people think that because “it’s natural, it must be safe.” However, anything that has possible *good effects* also has *side effects*. In fact, some herbs can cause sickness and even death. For example, ephedra/ma huang, used as a decongestant and appetite suppressant, is known to cause heart and blood pressure problems. Research on herbal effectiveness, side effects, and herb-drug interactions is only now beginning.

## Quality issues

In the United States, herbal products are not categorized as drugs, so they are not regulated by our government. They do not have to be tested for safety or purity by manufacturers, and studies have shown that the amount of herb can range from 0 percent to 150 percent of the amount claimed on the label. The herb in the bottle may even differ from the herb on the label. Here are some of the other problems that can occur:

- Toxicity from the herb (the herb makes you sick)
- Contaminated with microorganisms (the herb causes infection)
- Contaminated with pesticides (pesticide used on the herb makes you sick)
- Imported herbal products may have prescription drugs added

## Herbs at Kaiser Permanente

- Kaiser Permanente carries only herb categories for which some evidence exists to show that the herbs may be effective to treat certain medical conditions. However, they are not required to go through FDA approval.
- As your partner in health, we encourage you to read this summary of currently available information. If you have any questions, talk with your health care professional.

## Before you self-treat

Before treating symptoms, refer to your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*, which provides information about when to seek professional care and when it’s safe to self-treat.

If you have further questions, talk with your personal physician or your pharmacist, or visit your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Department. For more information, you can order a free copy of our *Healthwise Handbook* by calling **1-800-464-4000** (English), **1-800-788-0616** (Spanish), or **1-800-777-1370** (TTY).

Consult a trusted information source such as Kaiser Permanente Online [www.kponline.org](http://www.kponline.org), our national members-only Web site, or the National Institutes of Health on the Web at [nccam.nih.gov](http://nccam.nih.gov).

*This herb data is provided for informational purposes only. This is not an endorsement of any product nor is it meant to substitute for the advice provided by physicians or other health care professionals. The information herein should not be used to diagnose or treat any health problem or disease.*

