

St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*)

Common Names: Goatweed, hypericum.

Location: St. John's Wort is a perennial plant native to Great Britain, especially Wales, and to northern Europe. European settlers brought it to the United States in the 1700's.

Description: Growing to a height of thirty-two inches, it bears bright-yellow petals in flowering tops. Traditionally, its petals were gathered in midsummer for use in herbal medicine.

Properties: The entire plant is used. Oils and tinctures made from St. John's Wort have a dark-red color imparted by hypericin, one of the medically active components of the herb. In Middle English, the termwort referred to any plant or vegetable that was used medicinally. St. John's wort got its name because it bloomed on, or near, June 24, which was known as St. John's Day in the Church calendar. In medieval England, St. John's Wort was used to treat attacks of insanity attributed to the work of evil spirits or the devil.

Uses: St. John's Wort has antibacterial, antidepressant, anti-inflammatory, antiviral, and pain-relieving properties. This herb's ability to fight depression also makes it useful in treating chronic fatigue syndrome and Lyme disease, and its ability to relieve pain makes it helpful for treating vocal pain and laryngitis associated with fibromyalgia. It can relieve headaches that occur with hay fever and stop the process within the brain that triggers nausea. Benefits of St. John's Wort for specific health conditions include treatment of the following: breast cancer by providing the cancer fighting compound hypericin, burns and skin disorders, cancer, carpal tunnel syndrome, Crohn's disease, hemorrhoids, irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), cuts, scrapes, abrasions. One of the plants most well known uses is for treating depression; wide-scale studies having shown its effectiveness. St. John's wort is also used for diabetes, ear infection, herpes virus infection, mastitis, headache, HIV/AIDS, insomnia, and vitiligo.

Doses: St. John's Wort is available in a variety of forms. For people with depression, St. John's Wort should be taken for no less than ten days to two weeks to determine if there is any improvement. If not, and especially if there is no benefit in four to six weeks, the herb should be discontinued. If the herb is helpful, however, there is no limitation on the length of time it can be taken.

Warnings: In some people, this herb may cause stomach upset, restlessness, mild allergic reactions, or fatigue. No medication, including St. John's Wort, is adequate treatment for people who experience a preoccupation with or repeated thoughts of death or suicide. If you do experience such thoughts, you should immediately seek professional help. Many science writers caution that hypericin can sensitize the skin to sunlight, causing a tendency to sunburn. To put this problem in perspective, over 60 million doses of St. John's Wort are dispensed every year in Germany alone, and only fewer than a dozen photosensitization reactions have ever been reported. The use of tanning beds or lamps is not recommended while taking this herb. If you are taking St. John's Wort as an antiviral aid, or to treat cancer or vitiligo, you need to expose your skin to sunlight to activate the herb's active constituents, so the preceding caution does not apply. However, you should note that over 85 percent of people with AIDS who take the herb for as long as six months experience at least one episode of severe sunburn. Also, people taking prescription medications that increase risk of sunburn, such as angiotensin-converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors, commonly prescribed for high blood pressure, should also avoid St. John's Wort. Since the antiviral effects of St. John's Wort against HIV has not yet been verified and is still undergoing scientific study, people with AIDS should use this herb only under the supervision of a knowledgeable health-care provider. Some scientific articles maintain that St. John's Wort contains MAO inhibitors, which can cause sudden attacks of severe high blood pressure when combined with the protein tyramine, which is found in aged cheeses, chocolate, and red wine, among many other foods. The studies reporting to find MAO inhibitors in St. John's Wort have not been replicated, though, and

there are no reports of people taking St. John's Wort having symptoms of this kind of drug interaction. However, if you are taking antidepressant drugs, whether MAO inhibitors, tricyclic antidepressants, or selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as fluoxetine, or the painkiller tramadol (Ultram), or the migraine medication sumatriptan (Imitrex), you should not take St. John's Wort at the same time. Doing so can cause serotonin syndrome, which can be life threatening. If you are interested in switching from a prescription drug to St. John's Wort, you need to let the medication flush out of your system for several weeks (depending on the drug) before you start using the herb.

Other drugs also pose a risk of undesirable interactions. If you are taking digoxin (lanoxicaps, Lanoxin), cyclosporine (Neoral, Sandimmune), protease inhibitors for HIV infection, birth control pills, amitriptyline (Elavil), warfarin (Coumadin), theophylline (Aerolate, Elixophyllin, Slo-Phyllin, and others), chemotherapy drugs, or antipsychotic medications, St. John's Wort might cause these drugs to be less effective. If you are taking medications that cause sun sensitivity, such as sulfa drugs, the anti-inflammatory medication piroxicam (Feldene), omeprazole (Prilosec), or lansoprazole (Prevacid), keep in mind that St. John's Wort might increase that effect. Similarly, you should not take it if you are planning to undergo any type of surgical procedure. This herb can intensify the effects of anesthesia, resulting in over-sedation.