

St. John's wort

St. John's wort is a yellow-leaved plant which has been used for hundreds of years to treat burns, insect bites, nerve pain, depression, sleep disorders, anxiety, and a variety of mental health problems (<http://nccam.nih.gov/health>). Recent scientific testing has shown the herb to be useful in treating mild to moderate depression, but doctors and researchers express concern about "the methodologic quality of the randomized, controlled trials and about potential publication bias," (*New England Journal of Medicine*; Herbal Remedies; Peter A.G.M De Smet, Pharm.D., PhD; 2002).

St. John's wort has its side effects as well; dry mouth, fatigue, anxiety and increased sun sensitivity are all possibilities. Drug interaction is also a risk with St. John's, as it can interfere with the way in which the body breaks drugs down (<http://nccam.nih.gov/health>).

Overview

Doctor-prescribed medications called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) designed to correct serotonin imbalance have been prescribed for years to treat illnesses such as depression and anxiety. A miracle drug to some, they have proven to be a financial burden and even death sentence to others—the Food and Drug Administration has "black boxed" many of them, forcing each prescription to carry a suicide advisory (www.blueshieldca.com). Problems such as these have encouraged the public to seek alternative remedies to assist them in serotonin balance.

5-HTP

5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP), the immediate precursor of serotonin, is sold online and at health food stores everywhere. Advocates for this product claim it elevates serotonin levels, alleviating problems with anxiety, sleep, compulsive disorders, migraines, fibromyalgia and overeating (www.wholehealth.com). A study done by the British Journal of Psychology showed no effects on major depression (<http://bjp.rcpsych.org>).

Marty L. Hinz, MD, president of clinical research for NeuroResearch Clinics, Inc. reminds the consumer: "These nutrients have tremendous potential due to their chemical properties... only fully realized in the hands of a professional..." (www.neuroassist.com).

SAMe

Available to buy online, SAMe is a new natural way to increase serotonin, but proceed with caution. It is a naturally occurring molecule in the body that affects numerous other

important molecules—including, hormones, fatty acids, DNA, proteins, cell membrane molecules and neurotransmitters (www.mskcc.org). Researchers believe that SAMe “may be linked to the synthesis of neurotransmitters such as serotonin and dopamine” and are testing it for use in the treatment of depression (www.mskcc.org). The Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center cautions not to take it if you are taking other SSRIs. So far research as to how effective it is has been inconclusive.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids

Omega-3 fatty acids are considered “essential fatty acids” because they are essential for a healthy brain and body. Studies show that people who have a diet higher in Omega-3 suffer less from feelings of hostility and depression (www.ummedu/altmed). Only found in a few food sources, mainly fish and nuts, the easiest way to incorporate it into your diet on a regular basis may be in pill form via fish oil capsules.

Acupuncture

After researching herbs and learning about side effects, you may be ready to consider acupuncture. It may involve getting poked with needles, but it actually produces pleasure: Research shows that acupuncture triggers the release of endorphins, natural opiates made by the body, and increases serotonin (www.newsweek.com). Other natural ways to increase serotonin include exercise, sunshine and meditation.