

Update: St. John's Wort and Depression

This herb may help depression, but it can have potentially serious side effects.

The herb St. John's wort has a 2,000-year tradition of use for depression, pain, and insomnia. It started to become popular in the late 1990s, when studies showed the herb worked as well as antidepressants (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or SSRIs) at treating mild-to-moderate depression. St. John's wort also had fewer of the typical side effects seen with SSRIs, such as drowsiness, nausea, or dry mouth. The herb acts like an antidepressant because it has two main active ingredients, hypericin and hyperforin, which inhibit the reuptake of serotonin, dopamine, and noradrenalin (norepinephrine). Allowing these mood- and energy-boosting neurotransmitters to linger in nerve synapses is what makes antidepressants work.

St. John's Wort Concerns. The use of this herb has dropped off—sales figures for 2015 are about half what they were in 2012—as newer research showed. St. John's wort interacts with many different types of drugs, including contraceptives,

anticoagulants, anticonvulsants, antiretrovirals, and some cancer therapies. It can also interact with antidepressants, causing a build-up of serotonin that can lead to high body temperature, agitation, and even seizures. Research also shows that the herb, especially the component hypericin (most, but not all, St. John's Wort formulas contain a standardized extract of hypericin)

Meeting Quality Standards

Testing of St. John's wort products by ConsumerLab.com in 2016 found that, of the 10 products selected for testing, 60 percent failed to meet quality standards. They did not contain listed or expected minimum amounts of hypericin, one of the active ingredients in St. John's Wort. Those brands that met quality standards: **Standard Process MediHerb St. John's Wort** (ConsumerLab.com's Top Pick); **Nature's Way Perika**; **Shaklee MoodLift Complex**; and **Gaia Herbs St. John's Wort Flower Buds, and Tops**.

Brands that didn't make the cut: NOW, Planetary Herbal, Swanson, Vitacost, The Vitamin Shoppe, and Whole Foods.

can cause sun sensitivity at higher doses (2-4 grams a day.) This can result in not just a bad case of sunburn but increased risk for cataracts, as hypericin builds up in the lens of the eyes. Quality is also an issue. Recent testing by ConsumerLab.com reveals problems with meeting stated label amounts of active ingredients (see "Meeting Quality Standards").

The Bottom Line. St. John's wort works for mild to moderate depression, but interacts with many drugs, may cause sun sensitivity, and has quality control issues. Use the criteria below for the safe use of this herb.

- Choose a brand that passed the ConsumerLab.com test (see "Meeting Quality Standards").
- Stick with a lower dose that is less likely to cause sun sensitivity. Most clinical trials have used St. John's wort extract standardized to 0.3 % hypericin content, with the most common dose being 300 mg three times daily for up to six weeks.
- Be extremely careful if you are taking other drugs, including antidepressants. Talk with your doctor about possible herb/drug interactions. 

—Gale Maleskey, MS, RD

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Get Cooking with Cocoa Powder

Cocoa powder is the most healthful form of chocolate in your kitchen.

The cocoa plant is named *Theobroma*, "food of the gods," and rightfully so. Research reveals there's health potential in cocoa beans, the bitter fruit that is the source of chocolate. Cocoa powder has been used medicinally for at least 500 years; perhaps it's time you followed this health tradition in your kitchen, too.

Cocoa Bean Health Bonus. Of particular interest are the special flavonoid compounds cocoa beans contain: flavanols and flavonols, which have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties. Research has documented heart health benefits of cocoa, and now new studies support additional advantages, including cognitive and vascular benefits and increased insulin sensitivity, according to a systematic review published in *Nutrition Reviews*. Another study, published in the *Journal of Nutrition*, suggested regular cocoa consumption

had positive effects on facial wrinkles and elasticity.

Benefits in the Powder. Cocoa powder is made from the cocoa bean, which is fermented, dried, and ground into paste. Once the cocoa butter is removed from the paste, the unsweetened cocoa powder remains. One tablespoon contains 12 calories, 2 grams (g) of fiber, 4% Daily Value (DV, based on 2000 calories per day) of iron, 7% DV of magnesium, and 10% DV of copper and manganese. Unsweetened cocoa powder has more flavonoids than sweetened cocoa powder or any chocolate bar because it has the least amount of processing and has no added ingredients compared to milk chocolate and even dark chocolate, which contain extra ingredients, such as sugar and milk fat.

Cooking with Cocoa. Unsweetened cocoa powder is a great addition to many dishes.

Try these ideas for cocoa inspiration.

- ▶ **Add a smoky, earthy flavor to savory dishes** with cocoa powder, such as Mexican mole sauce, black bean soups, or chili.
- ▶ **Mix cocoa powder with balsamic vinegar and olive oil** to enhance traditional balsamic vinaigrette.
- ▶ **Add a spoonful of luscious cocoa powder to your morning porridge** along with fruit, cinnamon, and nuts.
- ▶ **Stir cocoa powder into breads**, such as muffins, pancakes, waffles, and quick-breads for added flavor.
- ▶ **Dust your next cup of coffee**, glass of milk, or bowl of yogurt with cocoa powder.
- ▶ **Blend cocoa powder into a healthy, indulgent smoothie** along with bananas, berries, nuts, and seeds.
- ▶ **Try this delicious, nutrient-rich snack:** Cocoa powder, chia seeds, and a drizzle of honey stirred into a scoop of cottage cheese. 

—Esther Ellis, MS, RD, LDN