

St John's Wort – What's All the Fuss About? by Dr A.J. Yates

Welcome to the beauty that is *Hypericum perforatum* – commonly known as St John's wort (pronounced *wurt* but don't get hung up about it!)



Often seen in packets being sold over the counter, St John's wort is sometimes described as a herbal antidepressant. Having an undergraduate degree in herbal medicine, I thought it might be useful to put together some common misconceptions about St John's wort:

1. **It's just a plant:** St John's wort is common throughout much of Britain and so may be overlooked, but it forms an important part of the natural environment. It's more noticeable at the height of summer owing to its bright yellow flowers – the name St John's wort is thought to be because the plant flowers around (and was traditionally picked on) St John's Day, which is 24th June. The species name (*perforatum*) comes from the perforations which can be seen through the leaves. These perforations contain the chemical hypericin, which is coloured red and thought to explain an alternative name *Blood of Christ*.
2. **It's only a herbal antidepressant:** Like all medicinal plants, St John's wort is made up of many chemicals. The number and combination of chemicals means that whilst the plant is commonly thought of as a herbal antidepressant, it has been used to treat other conditions for over a thousand years (Watkins et al., 2011). Modern medical herbalists use St John's wort to treat a range of conditions including neuralgia (nerve pain) and viral conditions.

3. **It doesn't even work for depression:** Despite a range of uses, in recent years the interest in St John's wort has been on its potential to treat conditions such as low mood. It has been demonstrated that the plant is as effective as orthodox antidepressants for mild to moderate depression but with fewer side effects (Ng et al., 2017). However, there is no one-size-fits-all, so it's not recommended to stop any pre-existing treatments in place of St John's wort, and don't use it in combination with other treatments without first seeking professional advice.
4. **You don't need the plant, you can just take the chemical:** There are two main chemicals thought to explain St John's wort's mood enhancing properties – hypericin & hyperforin. Investigations into single chemicals are often disappointing. Rather than reduce the plant down to a single chemical, research suggests that it is the combination of constituents that seem to explain the overall effect (Klemow et al., 2011).
5. **It's a natural product, so it's safe to take:** Whilst the plant itself is thought to be safe, some research has urged caution when using St John's wort. The plant can have an impact on the liver, with a result that it can alter the drug metabolism of medication (Davis et al., 2014) such as anti-cancer drugs (Alsanad et al., 2014), anti-coagulants, immuno-suppressive drugs, and the oral contraceptive pill (Russo et al., 2014). In fact, St John's Wort is one of the few medicinal plants to be listed in the *British National Formulary* (a joint publication of the British Medical Association and the Royal Pharmaceutical Society which aims to provide prescribers, pharmacists, and other healthcare professionals with sound up-to-date information about the use of medicines). It can also cause sensitivity to light in some individuals, so is best taken under the supervision of a medical herbalist.
6. **I don't have any where I live:** Being a wild plant, St John's wort is easily overlooked, but is an excellent example of the traditional medicines (including plants such as dandelion, clover and chamomile) that we overlook when out and about. Herbalists will often organise herb walks to help educate people about the fascinating plants on their doorstep (so are worthwhile looking out for).

Even if you never take St John's wort, getting out in nature is good for both physical & mental health. Why not go for a walk next time you need to open the tap on your stress container, and take time to pay attention to the weeds and wild flowers in your neck of the woods? There's a whole world out there waiting to be discovered!

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