

Debate on St. John's Wort Continues

Largest U.S. study to-date finds St. Johns Wort ineffective in treating moderately severe depression.

In the largest controlled clinical trial testing the efficacy of St. John's Wort (SJW) for "moderately severe" depression to-date, researchers found SJW was no different than a placebo in treating patients with "moderately severe" depression.

Supplement experts criticize the study's focus on this type of severe depression, also called *major depressive disorder*, emphasizing SJW's intended usage for mild-to-moderate depression only. Several previous controlled studies have demonstrated benefits in subjects treated for mild-to-moderate depression with SJW. Researchers of this study point out, however, the risk of undiagnosed individuals with severe depression inappropriately self-medicating themselves with an herbal supplement without proper diagnosis.

Researchers recruited 340 participants from 12 U.S. clinics diagnosed with "moderately severe" depression who had no history of suicide attempts, additional psychological disorders, or other factors that could potentially confuse the findings. Participants were assigned to SJW, the common antidepressant, Zoloft, or a placebo, and followed from 2 to 6 months.

Patients' response with the treatments was measured weekly using common physiological depression scales. Neither SJW nor Zoloft did better than the placebo in treating the study participants. Marked improvement was documented for 23.9% of subjects taking SJW, 24.8% for Zoloft, and 31.9% for the placebo.

There is considerable controversy brewing over this research, but public health experts are likely to agree on one thing: herbal remedies, like drugs, can be powerful medicines and are not appropriate for all individuals or all diagnoses. Experts caution individuals from using SJW or other medications for depression without seeking diagnosis first, and psychological support as part of their therapy.

References:

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