The St. John's wort (Hypericum perforatum) plant also has a long history of medicinal use as an anti-inflammatory, sedative, analgesic, antiviral, and vulnerary (enhances healing of wounds and burns).

The leaves, stems, buds, and flowers of St. John's wort contain numerous active constituents, including hypericin, hyperforin, pseudohypericin, tannins, volatile oils, and a broad range of flavonoids. Early trials indicated that hypericin, the red pigment concentrated in the flowers, was the main active component. However, researchers now believe that it is the combination of all the compounds, rather than any single component, that is responsible for the medicinal properties of St. John's wort.

**Brighten your day**

Depression affects thousands of Canadians each year, costing the nation millions of dollars in treatment and lost productivity. A variety of antidepressant drugs, known as tricyclic and monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), can produce unwanted side effects in some patients.

The good news is that, in comparative studies, St. John's wort is as effective in relieving the symptoms of mild to moderate depression (including anxiety, feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and emotional fear), as the most commonly prescribed antidepressants—with significantly fewer side effects.

Conventional medications are often not well-tolerated by children, but St. John's wort has been investigated as an alternative for treating mild depression in children. In 2003 a small pilot study of 33 children, ages six to 16, demonstrated that St. John's wort was effective in relieving the symptoms of depression in 75 percent of the participants, with only a few mild side effects.

St. John's wort has also been shown to benefit individuals suffering from seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a form of depression that occurs during the winter months due to a lack of sunlight. The medicinal benefit of St. John's wort for these conditions can be further enhanced when used in conjunction with diet and lifestyle improvements.

Dosages of the whole-plant extract typically range between 300 and 900 mg, divided into two or three daily doses. For some individuals, St. John's wort works relatively quickly; others may not notice the full therapeutic benefit for up to eight weeks.

**Potential cancer fighter**

St. John's wort also shows promise in treating alcoholism. In three recent animal studies, the herb significantly reduced the craving for and the intake of alcohol. Hypericum is also being investigated in animal and laboratory studies for its antitumour properties. The active constituent hyperforin...
appears to induce tumour cell death and inhibit the growth of rat and human mammary cancer, squamous cell carcinoma, malignant melanoma, and lymphoma, at least as well as or better than cytostatic drugs (which inhibit or suppress cell growth).

St. John's wort has been proven to be a safe, nontoxic herb when used in normal therapeutic doses. However, it should be avoided in combination with digoxin, and immunosuppressive and antidepressant drugs. Although it has a reputation for causing photosensitization when in contact with direct sunlight, this problem is largely overstated. Nonetheless, if used at higher doses by fair-skinned individuals, there is the potential for skin sensitivity.

The anti-inflammatory, pain-relieving, and antibacterial actions of St. John's wort are appropriate for the symptoms of:
- neuralgia
- shingles
- sciatica
- rheumatic pain
- general restlessness
- insomnia

The tincture or capsules may be useful in relieving the physical and emotional symptoms of premenstrual syndrome and menopause including:
- cramps
- irritability
- food cravings
- breast tenderness

Externally, oil infused with the fresh plant speeds the healing of:
- surgical incisions
- bruises
- lacerations
- injuries involving nerve damage
- carpal tunnel syndrome
- first-degree burns, including sunburn

The oil is used internally as a diuretic and for the treatment of stomach ulcers and chronic gastritis.

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