St. John’s Wort Extract Shown as Effective as and Safer than Paxil®


St. John’s wort (*Hypericum perforatum* L., Clusiaceae) is a traditionally used herbal remedy for “melancholy” and related depressive states. Numerous clinical trials have demonstrated the overall effectiveness and safety of various St. John’s wort (SJW) preparations. In 1996 the *British Medical Journal* published a meta-analysis of 23 previously published clinical trials on the hypericin-standardized SJW extract (hypericin is one of the compounds in SJW), concluding that SJW was safe and effective in treating mild to moderate forms of major depression. A highly publicized trial in 2002 funded by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine of the National Institutes of Health concluded that a hypericin-standardized SJW preparation and the popular prescription antidepressant sertraline (Zoloft®, Pfizer) were ineffective in treating patients with chronic moderate to severe depression. A follow-up meta-analysis confirms that SJW preparations are more effective than placebo in mild to moderate depression.

According to this randomized, double-blind, reference-controlled trial, patients who took 900 mg per day of a standardized German SJW extract (WS® 5570, W. Schwabe, Karlsruhe, Germany) had as much benefit as the pharmaceutical drug paroxetine (Paxil®, GlaxoSmithKline). Paroxetine is a prescription antidepressant drug in the class known as SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors). In some clinical outcomes, including the primary efficacy endpoint (a decrease of the depression scale score), WS 5570 was superior to the pharmaceutical antidepressant.

A reference-controlled trial is different from a placebo-controlled trial where some of the patients take a placebo as a control to test the effect of the herb or drug being studied. In a reference-controlled trial, the substance being tested is compared directly to a known active material, in this case, the FDA-approved prescription antidepressant drug, paroxetine.

The trial took place in various centers in Germany on patients from the ages of 18 to 70 during the years 2000 to 2003. The full treatment period was for 6 weeks. The patients had been diagnosed to have moderate to severe levels of major depression.

In the study, 251 patients were randomized to receive either 900 mg/day of WS 5570 or 20 mg/day of paroxetine. If a patient did not experience a measurable response after 2 weeks, the dose was doubled. Patients in the SJW group experienced significantly better improvement as measured by the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (HAMD), an internationally accepted severity scale for depression.

The trial results showed that the SJW actually produced more benefit than the pharmaceutical drug: patients in the SJW group experienced a three-point greater decrease in the average HAMD total score compared to the original scores (baseline) than did those taking paroxetine. The improvement in the SJW patients was considered clinically significant: a responder rate (50% improvement on HAMD) of 70% for the SJW patients versus 60% for those on paroxetine, and a remission rate (HAMD equal or less than 10) of 50% for SJW versus 35% for paroxetine. Further, in the secondary efficacy measures: other standard depression scales including the clinical global impression, SJW was rated superior.

Regarding the safety aspects of the trial, the SJW produced significantly fewer adverse side effects than the conventional drug: paroxetine patients reported 269 adverse effects compared to only 172 for those on SJW. The most frequently reported adverse effect for both treatments was stomach upset, a fairly common side effect in many clinical trials of this type.

The results of this trial are consistent with a previously published larger trial in France. In that double-blind, randomized, placebo-controlled trial conducted on 375 subjects, 900 mg per day of the same SJW extract (WS 5570) showed more benefit for depressed patients than did the placebo.

A dietary supplement product of identical strength to WS® 5570 is available in health food stores in the United States under the trade name Perika® (Nature’s way Products, Springville, UT). Marketed for helping to create a positive mood, this product (known as WS® 5572) contains the same patented, standardized extract as WS 5570. Both WS 5570 and WS 5572 are standardized to SJW’s hyperforin content at levels of 3-5%. Most other clinical trials on SJW have utilized an SJW extract standardized to 0.3% levels of total hypericins (LI 160, aka Jarsin® 300, Lichtwer Pharma, Berlin, Germany). HG

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References