St John’s Wort (Hypericum perforatum)

| Practice points |

St John’s wort (SJW) is a popular treatment for mild-moderate depression and appears to be as effective as standard antidepressants with fewer side effects. There is also some evidence for SJW in juvenile depression and menopausal hot flushes. Fair skinned people taking SJW should take extra precautions in the sun. Interactions are possible with some medicines.

| Key indications |

Depression: A number of systematic reviews and meta-analyses have reported that St John’s wort is as effective as standard antidepressants for the treatment of mild-moderate depression, with fewer side effects.1-3 There is also some evidence that certain extracts may also be useful in moderate-severe depression and for prophylaxis after recovery from an acute episode.4

Juvenile depression: SJW has been tested in children aged 6 years and over with depression. Although there were some promising preliminary results controlled studies are required to confirm benefits.5

Menopause: A systematic review and meta-analysis reported potential benefits for menopausal symptoms including hot flushes.6

| Key actions |

Antidepressant
Anxiolytic
Neuroprotective
Antimicrobial

| Recommended Doses |

Extracts vary in the concentration of various active compounds (e.g. hypericin and hyperforin) so results cannot necessarily be extrapolated from one standardised preparation to another.8 Extracts and dosage regimens vary from trial to trial but typical doses of extract include:

Depression: 500 to 1200 mg daily2
Juvenile depression: 150-300 mg three times daily5

Menopause: 900 mg three times daily6

| Adverse Effects |

Adverse effects are infrequent and generally mild. They may include gastrointestinal symptoms and sensitivity to light. Photosensitivity may occur in high doses but this is rare.

| Cautions/ Contraindications |

Fair skinned people taking SJW with a high hypericin content should be advised to take extra precautions in the sun. Although studies investigating use in pregnancy and lactation have not revealed significant effects, SJW is generally not recommended in pregnancy and use in lactation may cause infant colic, drowsiness or lethargy.

| Possible Interactions |

CYP450 enzyme substrates (2C19, 3A4): May increase activity of enzyme systems and thereby decrease blood levels of substrates. Studies with oral contraceptives, warfarin, protease inhibitors, reverse transcriptase inhibitors, simvastatin, atorvastatin, verapamil, irinotecan, imatinib, methadone, cyclosporin, tacrolimus, fexofenadine, nefedipine, midazolam, omeprazole and voriconazole.

Digoxin: may decrease blood levels and drug effect
P-gp substrates: May decrease blood levels and drug effect
Prescription antidepressants: may cause serotonergic syndrome with SSRIs; may decrease blood levels of TCAs

REFERENCES
1. Ernst. E. Review: St John’s wort superior to placebo and similar to antidepressants for major depression but with fewer side effects. Evid Based Ment Health 2005;8(3):78.