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St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) and Pregnancy

This sheet talks about the risks that exposure to St. John's Wort can have during pregnancy. With each pregnancy, all women have a 3% to 5% chance of having a baby with a birth defect. This information should not take the place of medical care and advice from your health care provider.

What is St. John's Wort?

St. John's Wort is an herbal medication most commonly used to treat mild or moderate depression. The active ingredients and components of St. John's Wort can vary widely and are altered by the harvesting, drying process, and storage of the plant material.

St. John's Wort has been used for many years in Europe, but has only recently been marketed in the United States. In the United States, St. John's Wort is characterized as a "dietary supplement." Unlike a prescription medication, it is not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration and does not have set standards for preparation, safety, or degree of effectiveness.

Can St. John's Wort interfere with other medicines?

Yes. St. John's Wort can interfere with other medicines. For example, St. John's Wort may interfere with the effectiveness of your birth control pills, and may result in unplanned pregnancies.

I am taking St. John's Wort, but I would like to stop taking it before becoming pregnant. How long does St. John's Wort stay in your body?

St. John's Wort is a long acting agent, with a 'half life' of 26.5 hours (half-life is the amount of time it takes your body to eliminate half of the dose of the medication). It is likely

that levels of St. John's Wort would be low after one week, but there are no studies looking at this. A safe approach would be to discontinue the medication one month before attempting to get pregnant. As always, it would be important to speak with your health care provider regarding the benefits of taking this medication for your specific situation, and any possible concerns with not taking it.

Should I stop taking St. John's Wort during my pregnancy?

In order to receive the most thorough care during pregnancy, you should contact your health care provider before making any changes in medication or stopping use any time during pregnancy. However, it is clear that more research is needed regarding the possible effect of St. John's Wort on a developing baby. In some situations where a woman is significantly depressed, her health care provider may chose to prescribe an antidepressant that has been better studied in pregnant women.

Can taking St. John's Wort during my pregnancy cause birth defects?

A small study that looked at 49 pregnancies with at least first trimester exposure to St. Johns Wort did not find an increase in birth defects compared to women taking prescription antidepressant medication.

Larger studies are needed to confirm this finding.

Can taking St. John's Wort during my pregnancy cause other kinds of problems?

St. John's Wort causes increased uterine muscle tone in laboratory animals, and thus could potentially cause uterine contractions. While one small study found higher rates of miscarriage in pregnancies where the mothers were taking St. John's Wort compared to a traditional antidepressant or no antidepressant, the rates between these three groups were not significantly different.

There are no studies regarding exposure to St. John's Wort and withdrawal symptoms or effects on the baby's behavior or development. Therefore, any possible associated risks are unknown. The tannic acid present in St. John's Wort may inhibit absorption of iron, an important mineral for pregnant women and their babies.

Can I take St. John's Wort while breastfeeding?

In a small study of 5 breastfeeding mothers of full-term older infants (10-22 weeks), the amount of St. John's Wort that the infants received through breast milk was found to be small. The mothers reported no negative effects in their infants. Another study, involving 33 women who took St. John's Wort and breastfed, found a higher frequency of side effects (colic and drowsiness) when compared to a group of infants whose mothers had depression but were not taking St. John's Wort. The infants did not require medical treatment.

St. John's Wort is a long-acting medication, and thus any amount ingested by the infant would be expected to remain for a long time. Until more is known about St. John's Wort, you may wish to speak with your health care provider regarding prescription antidepressants that have been better studied in breastfeeding women.

What if the father of the baby takes St. John's Wort?

One study found that large amounts of St. John's Wort added directly to semen decreased sperm movement and viability. Effects on male fertility from ingesting St. John's Wort has not been evaluated but there are currently no human data to suggest that use of St. John's Wort by the father would negatively affect the sperm or increase the risk for birth defects. For more information about a father's exposures and pregnancy, please see the OTIS fact sheet [Paternal Exposures and Pregnancy](#).

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*If you have questions about the information on this fact sheet or other exposures during pregnancy, call **OTIS** at **1-866-626-6847**.*