

5 Natural Products as Good as Prescription Drugs

We're a medicated nation. American doctors write more than 4 billion prescriptions for drugs every year to the tune of about \$320 billion.

Almost 70 percent of us take at least one drug regularly, and according to the Centers for Disease Control, the majority of Americans aged 60 and older take two or more prescription drugs, and 37 percent used at least five.

A study published in the journal *ACS Chemical Neuroscience* found that in 2011, antidepressants were the most prescribed class of drugs. The No. 1 selling brand-name prescription overall was the cholesterol-lowering drug Lipitor.

In addition to being costly, many drugs come with a wide range of serious, even possibly lethal, side effects. But there are natural substances that rigorously conducted scientific studies have shown work as well as pharmaceuticals for common ailments, including depression and high blood cholesterol, with few or no side effects.

Check out these products that are available on store shelves:

- **Red yeast rice.** The Chinese have used red yeast rice for years to lower cholesterol. Made from fermenting a variety of yeast called *Monascus purpureus* over red rice, it has the same chemical composition as the prescription drug lovastatin, according to the University of Maryland. A 2008 study compared people who took fish oil and red yeast rice with those who took simvastatin (Zocor), and cholesterol levels were reduced in both groups. Numerous studies have shown that using red yeast rice results in a reduction of cholesterol – up to 34 percent – over placebo.

- **St. John's wort.** The ancient Greeks used the herb St. John's wort to treat a variety of medical conditions, including depression, and today it's one of the most commonly used supplements in the United States. The Cochrane Collaboration, which reviewed the effectiveness of health treatments, studied the results of 29 trials that compared St. John's wort to prescription antidepressants. They found that the herb treated mild-to-moderate depression as effectively as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), which include Prozac, Celexa, and Zoloft. In addition, St. John's wort doesn't appear to depress sex drive, a common side effect of prescription antidepressants.
- **Ginkgo biloba.** One of the oldest trees on Earth – it goes back more than 200 million years – Ginkgo biloba was used in Chinese medicine as early as 2800 B.C. The supplement, which uses the herb's leaves, boosts mental functioning by increasing blood circulation to the brain. Ginkgo is sold in Europe as an approved drug in both over-the-counter and prescription versions. "A couple of meta-analyses and systematic reviews show that ginkgo biloba is helpful for dementia in about the same range as drugs being pushed very heavily to treat Alzheimer's," Adriane Fugh-Berman, MD, told WebMD. Fugh-Berman is an associate professor in the complementary and alternative medicine master's program of the department of physiology and biophysics at Georgetown University School of Medicine.
- **Curcumin.** A study at Baylor University found that curcumin, the main compound in the spice turmeric, worked as well as the popular antidepressant Prozac. Study participants were divided into three groups: one took 500 milligrams of curcumin twice a day; the second took a standard dose of Prozac, and the third group took a combination of both. After six weeks, curcumin relieved symptoms of depression as effectively as Prozac. "It was a surprise to us to see that curcumin

actually worked as good as the antidepressant,” said researcher Ajay Goel, M.D. “So this is amazing news.”

- **SAMe.** S-Adenosylmethionine (SAMe) is a naturally occurring compound in the body, and many well-designed scientific studies have shown that SAMe supplements ease the pain of osteoarthritis. Several studies found it was just as effective as nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), such as ibuprofen and naproxen, to relieve the pain and swelling of joints. At the end of a two-month period, a randomized trial found that a daily dose of 1,200 mg of SAMe was as effective as Celebrex, a COX-2 inhibitor, in relieving pain. In addition, studies have shown that SAMe relieves depression. A meta-analysis of studies found that it was as effective as standard prescription tricyclic antidepressants, such as Elavil, in reducing the symptoms of depression.

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