Summary
Natural Medications in Psychiatry

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Introduction: Natural Medications in Psychiatry

- Easy access, good tolerability.
- Used by many who have not responded to standard therapies.
- Limited research; effectiveness unclear.
- Toxicity, adverse effects, interactions.
- Different preparations/purity.
- Insurance does not cover the costs.

St John’s Wort

- One of the better studied natural antidepressants.
- Appears to be effective for mild to moderate forms of depression.
- Caution is required because of varied and potentially serious herb-drug interactions.

S-Adenosylmethionine (SAMe)

- Evidence is supportive of antidepressant efficacy and safety.
- May be used as monotherapy or in combination with standard antidepressants.
- Cost may be prohibitive to some individuals.

Omega-3 Fatty Acids: DHA and EPA

- Omega-3 fatty acids may have broad applications in psychiatric disorders.
- Eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) are thought to be the most psychotropically active of the omega-3s.
- Depression appears to be the most supported indication for the omega-3s.

Rhodiola Rosea

- Rhodiola is thought to function as an adaptogen, a substance that stimulates the body’s healing mechanisms.
- Rhodiola may be best suited for mood disorders characterized by fatigue and stress as well as sexual dysfunction.
- There is a risk of adverse interactions with selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).

5-Hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP)

- 5-Hydroxytryptophan may be an effective antidepressant, working through stimulation of serotonergic mechanisms.
- Although once banned by the FDA for associated toxic reactions, 5-HTP is currently back on the market and considered very safe with current manufacturing standards.
- There has been limited research on 5-HTP since the 1980s, and new studies are called for.
Valerian (Valeriana Officinalis)

- Valerian appears to be an effective and safe sedative and hypnotic.
- Research data are somewhat limited.
- Valerian may work more slowly than benzodiazepines, promoting improved sleep over a few weeks.

Melatonin

- Melatonin appears to be an effective hypnotic that may be especially good for sleep disturbances associated with circadian disruptions (e.g., shift work and travel across time zones).
- Melatonin may be especially useful for children and the elderly for whom benzodiazepines may prove too sedating.
- Melatonin appears safe, and although some serious side effects have been reported, they are rare.

Ginkgo Biloba

- Ginkgo appears to be effective for slowing down the course of dementia.
- Ginkgo may be safely combined with cholinesterase inhibitors, with possible synergy.
- Ginkgo appears safe, though caution is required in patients taking anticoagulants or undergoing surgery because ginkgo inhibits platelet-activating factor (PAF).

Who Should Use Natural Remedies?

- Some mildly ill people with a strong interest and who don’t mind the cost can use natural remedies.
- Some people have not responded to or had too many side effects from multiple standard agents.
- But they are often the most difficult to treat.
- It is best to avoid in pregnancy in most cases.
- Watch for interactions in patients on multiple medications.