

Saffron

Saffron is the oldest antidepressant in continuous use. Some 5,000 to 10,000 years ago, physicians in Persia and Asia discovered it treated “melancholy.” But it was only recently that those benefits were confirmed. In 25 controlled trials, saffron treated depression better than placebo and as well as an antidepressant.

Saffron also works in people who don't tend to respond as well to traditional antidepressants, including older or younger patients, obesity, medical illness, and depression after childbirth (postpartum), after menopause (postmenopausal), or after a history of substance use (methamphetamine or heroin).

Saffron also improves sleep quality, cognition, ADHD, dementia, and OCD. When people add it to antidepressants, they tend to have less side effects on the antidepressant, particularly sexual side effects.

This herbal medicine is derived from the same plant used in cooking, but the medicine form is less expensive (\$12-30 per month).

Medical benefits include weight loss, premenstrual syndrome, fatty liver, diabetes, and prevention of cancer, dementia, and macular degeneration.

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Saffron starts to work for depression as early as one week, and its benefits continue to build over the first two months.



How does it work?

Saffron promotes brain health through antioxidant, anti-inflammatory and neuroprotective effects. It also modulates serotonin and dopamine, neurotransmitters involved in depression and anxiety.

How should I take it?

Most studies used a dose of 30 mg/day of saffron (extract of the *C. sativus* plant). A reliable branded extract is Affron, which is licensed through multiple brands (they are listed at www.affronsaffron.com, eg California Gold, Solaray, Natural Factors).

Affron was tested in research, but other brands have a similar composition. If using other brands, look for products with at least 2% safranals or 3.5% lepticrosalides. Swanson makes a good one at a low cost (*Swanson Full Spectrum Saffron, Whole Ground Stigmas*).

What if I forget a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember it. However, if it is almost time for the next dose, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule. Do not take a double dose to make up for a missed one.

How long do I need to take it?

This depends on your diagnosis and which other medications you are taking.

What happens if I stop it?

Saffron does not have known withdrawal problems.

Side effects

Saffron is generally well tolerated. Side effects are rare; the most common reported side effects are fatigue, anxiety, increased appetite, nausea and headache.

Saffron may have anticoagulant effects (reducing blood-clotting) which may be a concern for people taking anticoagulants, undergoing surgery, or who are at risk for stroke.

Saffron does not have known health risks at doses below 1,500mg daily, though its safety has not been as extensively studied as the safety of medications has. It can be toxic at doses above 5,000mg daily.

Don't mistake saffron for an alternative form called meadow saffron or *Colchicum autumnale*, which is toxic.

Drug interactions

Saffron may raise levels of drugs that are metabolized by CYP3A4. Among psychiatric medications, that includes some antipsychotics (cariprazine, lumateperone, lurasidone, quetiapine, ziprasidone, pimavanserin), citalopram, buspirone, guanfacine, a few benzos, and z-hypnotics (zolpidem, eszopiclone, zaleplon).

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 7/22/2025