

Saffron

Saffron is a natural spice used in cooking. In medicinal form, it treats depression as effectively as antidepressants. It improves obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), sleep quality, sexual function, weight loss, menopausal symptoms, and cognition. In one study, it treated ADHD as well as ritalin.

Saffron has been used as a folk-remedy for many years. Modern studies suggest it may prevent cancer, dementia, and macular degeneration.

Saffron starts to work for depression as early as 1 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 (a neurotransmitter 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). Two different forms of saffron have been used in research, and both had similar results:

- Extracts with 0.30–0.35mg safranal/15 mg capsule (or 2% safranal)
- Extracts with 0.13–0.15mg of safranal and 1.65–1.75 mg crocin/15 mg capsule

In some studies the compounds were extracted from the petal of the plant, and in others from the stigma. Extracts of the stigma are less expensive. It is also available as a corm extract (the underground plant stem) though this form has only been studied in animals.



The Organization for Standardization has established a rating system to evaluate the purity of saffron: IV (poorest), III, II and I (finest quality).

Products with the right ingredients include (links at chrisaikenmd.com/supplements):



Swanson Superior Herbs: saffron 30mg, 2% safranal (take one/day; cost = 29 cents/day).

Exir: 30mg, 2.5% safranal (take two/day, cost = 35 cents/day).

Paradise Herbs Saffr-Tone: 15mg, 2% safranal (take two/day; cost = 66 cents/day).

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 are anxiety, 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 5,000 mg daily.

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

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 8/5/2024