
Kava

Summary

- Kava is a type of drink made from the ground roots of the plant *Piper methysticum*.
 - Long-term kava use is associated with a range of problems including apathy, skin ulcers and liver damage.
 - There are restrictions on importing kava into Australia.
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Kava is a drug made from the ground roots of the plant *Piper methysticum*, a member of the pepper family that also includes black pepper. It is native to the South Pacific.

Kava can be consumed as a drink or as a supplement or extract. Traditionally the root is crushed, ground or powdered and soaked in water to be drunk as a tea. This tea is often consumed socially and as part of traditional ceremonies and cultural practices throughout the Pacific Islands.

In small doses, the effects of kava include muscle relaxation, sleepiness and feelings of wellbeing. However, long-term use of kava can lead to a range of health problems, including malnutrition, weight loss and apathy.

Laws restrict kava imports

In 2007, new restrictions on importing kava into Australia were introduced. These include:

- The importation of kava in Australia is only permitted for medical or scientific purposes.
- People aged over 18 years entering Australia can bring in up to two kilograms of kava in their accompanied baggage. Permits are required for amount exceeding two kilograms.

How kava works

The pharmacologically active chemicals present in kava are known as kavalactones. Kava is a nervous system depressant. Even though there is no alcohol in kava, it can produce similar symptoms to drunkenness, including difficulty with balance, and slurred speech.

Effects of kava

Variations in growing conditions (such as soil type and the amount of sunlight and water available) and different varieties of plant mean that the strength of kavalactones can vary widely. The strength of the dose also depends on how the drink is prepared and how much powdered kava is added to the water.

The effects of kava can vary depending on your body size, general health, if you have taken kava before, the strength and amount that is consumed and if other drugs are being consumed at the same time.

Common effects include:

- for small doses -- relaxed muscles, sleepiness, feelings of wellbeing and relaxation, mild loss of feeling in the throat and mouth, appetite loss
- for larger doses -- dilated pupils, reddened eyes, nausea, stupor, induced sleep, reduced muscle control (ataxia).

Kava is dangerous for some people

It is dangerous to take kava in combination with alcohol or other psychoactive drugs. There is little information on how kava interacts with other medication, so it's best to avoid kava if you are taking any prescription medication.

Kava is a central nervous system depressant and should not be taken if you:

- are a pregnant woman
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- a breastfeeding mother
- are driving or operating heavy machinery
- are currently taking pharmaceutical medication
- drink large quantities of alcohol
- have a pre-existing heart, lung or liver condition.

Children should not take kava

Damage from long-term use of kava

In the long term, kava use can cause a wide range of problems including:

- breathing difficulties
- visual changes, including sensitivity to light (photophobia)
- alterations to blood cells, including white and red blood cells, and platelets
- liver damage
- compromised immune function
- kidney damage
- contact dermatitis -- causing scaly, flaky rash on the skin. Yellow or white ulcerations or lesions may also occur (commonly known as 'crocodile skin' or 'kani kani')
- appetite loss, leading to malnutrition and weight loss
- loss of drive and motivation
- worsened symptoms of pre-existing mental illnesses such as schizophrenia.

Kava withdrawal risk is low

There is no evidence to suggest that people who regularly drink large doses of kava become dependent, so there doesn't seem to be a risk of withdrawal if a person suddenly stops taking kava. However, medical supervision is recommended.

Medicinal uses of kava

In 2003, products containing kava were banned in most European countries, because of concerns about its possible toxic effects on the liver. In Australia, all products containing kava were temporarily withdrawn, following the death of one person from liver failure.

This restriction was withdrawn after review by the Therapeutic Goods Administration in 2005 and, as a result, products containing standardised amounts of kava such as supplements and teabags, are available in Australia. Products containing kava can be used for stress, anxiety and insomnia, although it is advised that you contact a healthcare professional before taking kava in this way.

Seek medical advice for kava symptoms

Consumers should immediately seek medical advice if they experience any symptoms while taking preparations containing kava, which include:

- appetite loss
- extreme tiredness
- raised body temperature
- nausea and vomiting
- abdominal pains
- brown-coloured urine
- unusual bruises or bleeding
- yellowing of the eyes or skin (jaundice).

Where to get help

- Your GP

- **Alcohol and Drug Foundation** Tel. 1300 85 85 84 -- for information
- **DirectLine** Tel. 1800 888 236 - for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral
- **Counselling Online** Tel. 1800 888 236 - for professional drug and alcohol counselling

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by:

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