
Kava

Summary

- Kava is a drug made from the ground roots of a plant found in the South Pacific.
 - It is taken as a drink, supplement or extract.
 - Long-term kava use is associated with a range of problems including apathy, weight loss and liver damage.
 - There are restrictions on importing kava into Australia.
-

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 a native plant found in the South Pacific.

Kava can be taken 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 South 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.

Australian laws and kava imports

Kava can only be imported into Australia for medical or scientific purposes.

People aged over 18 years entering Australia can bring in up to four kilograms of kava in their accompanied baggage (although local restrictions mean that kava cannot be brought into Western Australia or the Northern Territory).

Read more about [kava import restrictions](#).

Kava – effects on the body

The active chemicals in kava are known as kavalactones. 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 a dose of kava also depends on how the drink is prepared and how much powdered kava is added to the water.

Kava is a central 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.

The effects of kava on your body can depend on:

- your body size
- your general health
- if you have taken kava before
- the strength and amount taken
- if you are taking other drugs 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, drowsiness, reduced muscle control (ataxia).
-

Kava is dangerous for some people

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

Do not take kava if you:

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

Children should not take kava.

Problems 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)
- slight 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
- 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 people who regularly drink large doses of kava become dependent. Because of this 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 a review by the Therapeutic Goods Administration in 2005. As a result of that review, products with standardised amounts of kava, such as in supplements and teabags, are available in Australia.

Products with kava can be used for stress, anxiety and insomnia. If you are thinking about taking kava for medicinal purposes, be sure to contact a healthcare professional first.

Seek medical advice for kava symptoms

Immediately seek medical advice if you experience any symptoms while taking preparations containing kava. Symptoms may 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 (doctor)
- **Alcohol and Drug Foundation** – list of help and support services in Australia, Tel. 1300 858 584
- **DirectLine** – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral, Tel. 1800 888 236
- **Counselling Online** – for professional drug and alcohol counselling, Tel. 1800 888 236

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

Alcohol and Drug Foundation

Content on this website is provided for information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not in any way endorse or support such therapy, service, product or treatment and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. The information and materials contained on this website are not intended to constitute a comprehensive guide concerning all aspects of the therapy, product or treatment described on the website. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions and to ascertain whether the particular therapy, service, product or treatment described on the website is suitable in their circumstances. The State of Victoria and the Department of Health & Human Services shall not bear any liability for reliance by any user on the materials contained on this website.

For the latest updates and more information, visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Copyright © 1999/2020 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.