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## Kava

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### 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. Kava is consumed as a drink or supplement. The crushed, ground or powdered root is added to water and drunk like tea.

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.

Kava is drunk at various social and ceremonial occasions throughout most of the Pacific Islands, and is used in some countries as a medicinal herb. In the early 1980s, kava was brought to Eastern Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory as a substitute for alcohol.

### 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.

### How kava works

The chemical ingredients of kava include kava lactones, which are thought to be pharmacologically active. These lactones are absorbed through the stomach wall into the bloodstream and reach the brain relatively quickly.

Kava is a nervous system depressant. Even though there is no alcohol in kava, it can produce similar symptoms to drunkenness, including staggering and an inability to talk properly.

### 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 kava lactones 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.

Common effects include:

- for small doses – relaxed muscles, sleepiness, feelings of wellbeing, 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

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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 by certain people, including:

- pregnant women
- breastfeeding mothers
- people who are driving or operating machinery
- anyone already taking therapeutic medicines
- children
- people with pre-existing heart, lung or liver problems.

### **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
- reduced immunity to infection
- kidney damage
- a scaly, dry, flaky rash or 'kava dermatitis' – one of the most commonly reported side effects of heavy kava use, as well as other skin conditions, such as yellow or white ulcer-like skin lesions (commonly called '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**

Products containing kava have been used in the past for medicinal purposes, including as an anxiolytic (anti-anxiety) or sedative.

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.

After a review by the Therapeutic Goods Administration in 2003, kava is available in restricted doses in Australia as supplements and teabags.

### **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 doctor
- DrugInfo 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.

### **Things to remember**

- Kava is a type of drink made from the ground roots of the plant *Piper methysticum*.
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- There are restrictions on importing kava into Australia.

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Alcohol and Drug Foundation

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