

Kava●

What is Kava?

Kava is a depressant drug, which means it slows down the messages travelling between the brain and the body. Kava is made from the root or stump of the kava (*Piper methysticum*) shrub.¹

Kava comes in different forms including:

- brownish-coloured drink
- brown powder
- capsules
- extracts
- drops.²

Other names

Kava kava, kawa, waka, lewena, yaqona, grog (Fiji), sakau (Pohnpei), 'awa (Hawaii), 'ava (Samoa) and wati (New Guinea).³

How is it used?

Pacific Islands

Traditionally, Pacific Islanders crushed, chewed and ground the root and stump of the shrub, then soaked it in cold water to produce a drink for ceremonies and cultural practices. These rituals were said to strengthen ties among groups, reaffirm status and help people communicate with spirits.¹

Many Pacific Islanders who have settled in Australia have continued drinking kava or using kava extracts.⁵

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Kava was introduced to the communities in the north of Australia in the 1980s as a substitute for alcohol, to reduce alcohol-related harms in the community. The kava drink is often used for sedative, hypnotic and muscle-relaxant effects, in much the same way that alcohol is used.¹

Herbal preparations

Kava extract is used in some herbal preparations. They are sold as over-the-counter tablets and preparations to be used in the treatment of insomnia, stress and anxiety.⁴

Effects of Kava

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. Even medications can produce unwanted side effects. It's important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

Kava affects everyone differently, based on:

- size, weight and health
- whether the person is used to taking it
- whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- the amount taken
- the strength of the drug.

The following effects may be experienced:

- feeling happy and relaxed
- mild sleepiness
- numb mouth and throat
- reduced or loss of appetite.⁶

If a large amount of kava is taken the following effects may also be experienced:

- drowsiness
- nausea
- loss of muscle control
- mild fever
- pupil dilation and red eyes.⁶

Long-term effects

Regular use of large amounts of kava may eventually cause:

- mood swings
- apathy
- dry, scaly skin
- malnutrition and severe weight loss
- getting infections more easily
- shortness of breath.

Manufactured products such as herbal remedies that contain kava extract have been linked to irreversible liver damage. Kava has been shown to cause liver damage when taken in an alcoholic or acetonetic extract. For this reason water based extracts of Kava (as a drink or tablet) should not be consumed with alcohol, especially if there is a history of liver damage or disease.^{6,7}

Using Kava with other drugs

Kava changes the way that the liver processes some types of medications and drugs, therefore you should consult with your healthcare provider before taking Kava.⁶

- **Kava + alcohol:** increased drowsiness, impaired reflexes and risk of liver damage.
- **Kava + benzodiazepines:** sedation.³

Kava in Australia

The import, advertising and sale of kava in Australia are strictly controlled. Kava is listed as a controlled substance under the Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations Act.

Commercial importations of kava are no longer allowed, except for medical or scientific purposes.

Passengers coming into Australia, who are over the age of 18 years, are allowed to bring 2kg of kava without a license or permit, provided it is in their accompanied baggage.⁷

Read more about importation of kava at:
odc.gov.au/import-restrictions-kava-and-khat

Withdrawal

There is no evidence that people who regularly use kava become dependent on the drug, so if you stop taking it, you are unlikely to experience withdrawal symptoms. However, if you have health problems seek medical advice.⁶

Getting help

If your use of Kava is affecting your health, family, relationships, work, school, financial or other life situations, you should seek help and support.

Help and support services directory:
adf.org.au/help-support/support-services-directory/

Information about treatment:
adf.org.au/alcohol-drug-use/supporting-a-loved-one/treatment/

References

1. Urquhart, B., & Thomson, N. (2009). Review of the misuse of kava among Indigenous Australians. Australian Indigenous Health Bulletin, 9(3), 1-14.
2. University of Maryland Medical Center. (2011). Kava kava.
3. National Centre for Complementary and Integrative Health. (2016). Kava.
4. Currie, B., & Clough, A. (2003). Kava hepatotoxicity with Western herbal products: does it occur with traditional kava use? Medical Journal of Australia, 178 (9), 421-422. Retrieved from 178 (9): 421-422.
5. Lee, K., Freeburn, B., Ella, S., Miller, W., Perry, J., & Conigrave, K. (2012). Handbook for Aboriginal Alcohol and Drug Work.
6. Ramzan, 2015, 'Phytotherapies: Efficacy, Safety, and Regulation' John Wiley & Sons Inc. 2015
7. Territory Health Services, Public Health Strategy Unit. (2005). The Public Health Bush Book (3rd ed.). Darwin: Territory Health Services.
8. The Office of Drug Control. (2016) <https://www.odc.gov.au/import-restrictions-kava-and-khat>

Always call an ambulance on triple zero (000) if an overdose is suspected: tell the paramedic exactly what has been taken. Paramedics are there to help and will not involve the police unless there is a danger to themselves or others.

Other help, support services and resources

Links to further help and support • adf.org.au/help-support/

Read about the potential of Kava in treatment for anxiety • adf.org.au/insights/kava-anxiety-treatment/

● **Further information**

DrugInfo • 1300 85 85 84

Free confidential information and advice about alcohol and other drugs (9am - 5pm, Mon-Fri)

Family Drug Help • 1300 660 068 • www.familydrughelp.com.au (Victorian-based)

Services are available to support those around you who may be affected by your drug use. As well as providing understanding, they can provide information about how best to help during treatment.

Family Drug Support • 1300 368 186 • www.fds.org.au (Australia-wide)



● **Stay informed**

 twitter.com/alcoholdrugdn

 facebook.com/alcoholdrugdn

● **Contact us**

 1300 85 85 84

adf.org.au