

Drug Facts: Kava



What Is Kava?

Kava, also known as *Piper methysticum* (intoxicating pepper), is a shrub native to the South Pacific Islands. It is made from the ground roots of the shrub, and is a member of the pepper family, which also includes black pepper.

For centuries, Pacific Island societies have traditionally consumed kava beverages for ceremonial, social, and medicinal purposes. It is a commonly used drug in aboriginal communities, located in places such as Northern Australia, and Hawaii. More recently, kava has increasingly been used for recreational purposes, and has grown in popularity around the world.

Kava is available in the form of drinks, dietary supplements, herbal remedies, and over-the-counter products. In small doses, it may produce mild euphoria, muscle relaxation, anxiety relief, sedation, and pain relief.

However, kava has not been approved for medical use, and long-term use has been linked to various health risks.

What Are Common Street Names?

Common street names for kava include: Kava Kava, Awa, Ava Pepper, Kew, Sakau, Tonga, Yangona, Ava Root, and Kawa.

How Is It Consumed?

Traditionally, kava is consumed in beverage form. It is prepared by chewing, or crushing the rootstock to produce a cloudy pulp that is then soaked in water to be drunk as a tea.

Kava is also sold as dietary supplement tablets, and capsules. It is also available as a whole root, a powdered root, extracts, tea bags, and instant drink mixes. It is also consumed in combination with other substances such as alcohol and kratom. However, kava should not be used together with other substances that have sedative effects, such as benzodiazepines or alcohol.

- Kava is a sedative drug that is used for muscle relaxation, anxiety relief and to produce a mild euphoria.
- Kava is available in a variety of forms including drinks, pills, powders and extracts.
- Kava use can lead to adverse effects such as malnutrition, skin problems and liver damage.
- Kava is legal in the United States, but caution is advised.



Traditional Kava Beverage



Kava Dietary
Supplement Capsules



Kava Tea Bags



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How Does Kava Effect The Body?

In small doses, Kava can cause muscle relaxation, sleepiness, feelings of well-being and relaxation, a mild euphoria, a temporary mild numbness in the throat and mouth and a decreased appetite. It acts as a central nervous system depressant and may impair balance and speech at higher amounts.

What Are The Adverse Effects Of Kava On The body?

Kava, in larger doses, can lead to dilated pupils, reddened eyes, nausea, drowsiness, and reduced muscle control (ataxia). Other possible adverse effects include digestive upset, headaches, and dizziness.

Long-term use may lead to kava dermatopathy (dry, scaly, flaking skin, reddened eyes, and temporary yellow discoloration of the skin, hair, and nails), along with malnutrition, weight loss, apathy, and reduced motivation. Other possible effects include visual changes such as increased sensitivity to light (photophobia), breathing difficulties, slight changes in blood cells, compromised immune function, worsening of pre-existing mental health conditions, and potential kidney or liver damage.

Kava And The Liver

There have been rare but sometimes severe cases of liver injury associated with kava use. Reports link various kava products to liver damage, including hepatitis, cirrhosis, and liver failure, some of which have been serious or fatal. Possible contributing factors include the use of undesirable kava plant varieties or inappropriate plant parts, contamination or adulteration of products, and concurrent alcohol consumption. Genetic differences may also influence susceptibility to liver toxicity, and using kava in large amounts or over long periods may increase this risk.

Is Kava Use Especially Dangerous For Some Groups Of People?

There is little information about how kava interacts with other medications, so it is best for people who are taking any type of prescription medicine to avoid it. Kava may also have special risks if taken during pregnancy or while breastfeeding because it contains compounds that could be harmful to the baby.

Other groups of people for whom kava is especially dangerous include children, people who operate heavy machinery, drink large quantities of alcohol, and who have a pre-existing heart, lung or liver condition.

What Is Kava's Legal Status In The United States?

Kava is not controlled under the Controlled Substances Act. In Connecticut, kava is legal for consumption and possession.

However, it should be noted that the FDA has issued an advisory in the past, alerting consumers and healthcare providers to the potential risk of liver-related injuries associated with the use of kava dietary supplements. Talk with your health care provider before using kava as a supplement.

Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

www.ct.gov/DMHAS

2-1-1 of Connecticut

www.211ct.org or call 2-1-1

National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

www.samhsa.gov

Drug Enforcement Administration

www.dea.gov

National Institute on Drug Abuse

www.nida.nih.gov



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