

herbs at a glance

Kava



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This fact sheet provides basic information about kava—common names, what the science says, potential side effects and cautions, and resources for more information.

Common Names—kava, kava kava, awa, kava pepper

Latin Name—*Piper methysticum*

Kava is native to the islands of the South Pacific and is a member of the pepper family. Kava has been used as a ceremonial beverage in the South Pacific for centuries.

Historically, kava was used to help people fall asleep and fight fatigue, as well as to treat asthma and urinary tract infections. It also had a topical use as a numbing agent. More recent folk or traditional uses include anxiety, insomnia, and menopausal symptoms.

The root and rhizome (underground stem) of kava are used to prepare beverages, extracts, capsules, tablets, and topical solutions.

What the Science Says

- Although scientific studies provide some evidence that kava may be beneficial for the management of anxiety, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has issued a warning that using kava supplements has been linked to a risk of severe liver damage.
- Kava is not a proven therapy for other uses.
- NCCAM-funded studies on kava were suspended after the FDA issued its warning.

Side Effects and Cautions

- Kava has been reported to cause liver damage, including hepatitis and liver failure (which can cause death).
- Kava has been associated with several cases of dystonia (abnormal muscle spasm or involuntary muscle movements). Kava may interact with several drugs, including drugs used for Parkinson's disease.
- Long-term and/or heavy use of kava may result in scaly, yellowed skin.

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- Avoid driving and operating heavy machinery while taking kava because the herb has been reported to cause drowsiness.
- Tell all your health care providers about any complementary health practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care. For tips about talking with your health care providers about complementary and alternative medicine, see NCCAM's Time to Talk campaign at nccam.nih.gov/timetotalk/.

Sources

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For More Information

Visit the NCCAM Web site at nccam.nih.gov and view *Using Dietary Supplements Wisely* (nccam.nih.gov/health/supplements/wiseuse.htm).

NCCAM Clearinghouse

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Web site: www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/sites/entrez

NIH Office of Dietary Supplements

Web site: www.ods.od.nih.gov

NIH National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus

Kava Listing: www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/natural/872.html

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