

Kava

This fact sheet provides basic information about the herb kava—common names, uses, potential side effects, and resources for more information. 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.

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

Latin Name—*Piper methysticum*

What It Is Used For

- Kava has been used to help people fall asleep and fight fatigue, as well as to treat asthma and urinary tract infections.
- Topically, kava has been used as a numbing agent.
- Today, kava is used primarily for anxiety, insomnia, and menopausal symptoms.

How It Is Used

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.
- Avoid driving and operating heavy machinery while taking kava because the herb has been reported to cause drowsiness.

- Tell your health care providers about any complementary and alternative practices you use. Give them a full picture of what you do to manage your health. This will help ensure coordinated and safe care.

Sources

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For More Information

Visit the NCCAM Web site at nccam.nih.gov and view:

- *What's in the Bottle? An Introduction to Dietary Supplements* at nccam.nih.gov/health/bottle/
- *Herbal Supplements: Consider Safety, Too* at nccam.nih.gov/health/supplement-safety/

NCCAM Clearinghouse

Toll-free in the U.S.: 1-888-644-6226

TTY (for deaf and hard-of-hearing callers): 1-866-464-3615

E-mail: info@nccam.nih.gov

CAM on PubMed

Web site: nccam.nih.gov/camonpubmed/

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/patient-kava.html

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National Institutes of Health



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

D314

Created May 2006

Updated June 2008

