



## What is kava?

Kava is a drug made from the roots of a type of pepper plant called *Piper methysticum* that grows in the Pacific islands.

## How do people use it?

The roots of the pepper plant are ground up or crushed and added to water and then drunk. Kava is used in traditional cultural events in the Pacific Islands. Aboriginal people brought kava to communities in Northern Australia as an alternative to alcohol.

## How does it work?

Kava contains chemicals called kava lactones which are absorbed in the stomach and travel in the bloodstream to the brain. The kava lactones have a painkilling, numbing effect which also relaxes the muscles. The strength of the kava drink can vary greatly depending on the variety of plant used and how it is prepared.

## What are the short term effects of kava?

In smaller doses the effects of kava include:

- ⊙ feeling happy and relaxed
- ⊙ sleepiness
- ⊙ a numb mouth and throat
- ⊙ loss of appetite
- ⊙ muscle weakness.

The effects from larger doses of kava include:

- ⊙ being unsteady on your feet
- ⊙ feeling sick in the stomach (nausea).

## What are the long term effects of kava?

Some people who use kava regularly over a long period of time may experience some of these side effects:

- ⊙ scaly skin rash
- ⊙ sore red eyes
- ⊙ loss of body fat (losing weight)
- ⊙ increased risk of infections
- ⊙ money problems
- ⊙ loss of family and community connection.

Kava affects liver function and there is a possibility that long term or high use can lead to liver damage.

## Can kava use lead to dependence?

There is no evidence that people who regularly use kava become physically dependent on the drug. If people stop using kava, they are unlikely to experience withdrawal symptoms.

However a person might spend too much time drinking kava (develop psychological dependence) and not enough time doing other things they usually do, like work, sport, music, spending time with family.

## Kava and the law

Kava is not grown in Australia, but can be imported as a food or for medical or scientific purposes under a permit system.

When travelling to Australia, people over the age of 18 years are allowed to bring up to 4 kg of kava in their luggage. However restrictions in the Northern Territory mean that kava cannot be brought into this jurisdiction.

If you want help or support or are worried about someone's ice use call the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) in your state.

## References

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