

KAVA

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Kava is a psychoactive plant found in the South Pacific Islands, including Hawaii, that has been used by indigenous Pacific Islanders for social, ceremonial, and medical purposes for centuries “with relatively low reported health risk.”¹ For those purposes, kava is typically consumed in a beverage (also called “kava”) made using the root of the plant.² It is also consumed in capsules, flavored and unflavored powdered extracts, and as a liquid extract dissolved in grain alcohol.³

Kava contains kavalactones which can act as a mild sedative.⁴ It can also induce muscle relaxation, numbness in the mouth and throat, and provide some pain relief.⁵ Some studies show that it can be used to reduce anxiety.⁶ According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), “[a]n analysis of six kava clinical trials found that kava (60-200 mg of kavalactones per day) produced a significant reduction in anxiety compared to placebo.” A meta-analysis that reviewed 29 clinical trials related to using medicinal herbs for the treatment of anxiety found that kava could effectively reduce anxiety but was “possibly ineffective in patients with generalized anxiety disorder.”⁷



In small quantities, such as that used in traditional preparations, kava appears to be relatively safe to use.⁸ It is not known to be habit-forming, and stopping use does not induce withdrawal symptoms.⁹ However, kava has been sold commercially in retail outlets, including “kava bars,” in the United States since the 1990s at concentrations that can reach up to 2-10 times the amount present in traditional kava beverages.¹⁰ The DEA warns that “individuals may be consuming 25 grams of kavalactones, which is approximately 125 times the daily dose in kava supplements.”¹¹ Recreationally, it is often used as an alcohol replacement or in combination with alcohol or other substances, including benzodiazepines and kratom.¹²

¹ “Kava,” Drug Enforcement Administration, March 2025, https://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_chem_info/kava.pdf and Eleanor Blair Towers, et al, “Increase in Poison Center Reports Linked to Kratom-Containing Kava Products – National Poison Data System, United States, 2000-2025,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 2, 2026,

https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/75/wr/mm7512a1.htm?s_cid=OS_mm7512a1_w#print.

² “Kava,” Drug Enforcement Administration, March 2025, https://www.deadiversion.usdoj.gov/drug_chem_info/kava.pdf.

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.* And see “Kava,” Alcohol and Drug Foundation, March 19, 2026, <https://adf.org.au/drug-facts/kava/>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ Wenting Zhang, et al, “Medicinal Herbs for the Treatment of Anxiety: A Systematic Review and Network Meta-analysis,” *Pharmacological Research* 179 (May 2022), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1043661822001499?via%3Dihub>.

⁸ Alcohol and Drug Foundation, *supra* note 5.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Eleanor Blair Towers, et al, “Increase in Poison Center Reports Linked to Kratom-Containing Kava Products – National Poison Data System, United States, 2000-2025,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 2, 2026, https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/75/wr/mm7512a1.htm?s_cid=OS_mm7512a1_w#print.

¹¹ DEA, *supra* note 2.

¹² See “When It Comes to Kava, ‘Natural’ Doesn’t Mean Safe,” *Cleveland Clinic*, Feb. 8, 2023, <https://health.clevelandclinic.org/what-is-kava> and Dennis Thompson, “Herbal Drug Kava Poses Increasing Health Threat in U.S., CDC Warns,” *U.S. News & World Report*, April 8, 2026, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2026-04-08/herbal-drug-kava-poses-increasing-health-threat-in-u-s-cdc-warns>.

Large doses of kava can cause drowsiness, nausea, and loss of muscle control, while long-term use of kava can cause: (1) mood swings; (2) dry, yellow, scaly skin; (3) malnutrition and weight loss; and (4) a lack of resistance to infections.¹³ Long-term use may also cause severe liver damage including liver failure and the need for a liver transplant.¹⁴ In 2002, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration issued a warning related to kava and the potential for severe liver injury which resulted in a decrease in its use until approximately 2011.¹⁵ From 2011 to 2025, poison control calls related to kava increased 383 percent.¹⁶ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) attributes this rise in calls to “the expanded availability of commercial kava products,” and the increase in individuals seeking alternatives to alcohol.¹⁷

In 2025, nearly one-third of kava-related poison control center calls received also involved kratom, while 32 percent of calls involved serious clinical outcomes.¹⁸ According to the CDC, the most common clinical effects reported were: vomiting, nausea, drowsiness, dizziness, lethargy, agitation, and tachycardia.¹⁹ When combined with kratom, “neurologic effects included seizures and tremor, and cardiovascular effects included hypertension.”²⁰

As with other herbal products sold at retail stores across the United States, kava products are unregulated which can lead to a great risk of harm to those who use these products, particularly when combined with alcohol or other substances.²¹ The CDC recommends targeted public health education to inform consumers, particularly young men, who represent the largest number of poison control calls, that using unregulated kava products is “associated with adverse health effects, especially when used in large quantities.”²²

RESOURCES

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¹³ Alcohol and Drug Foundation, *supra* note 5.

¹⁴ Towers et al, *supra* note 10.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ DEA, *supra* note 2.

²² Towers et al, *supra* note 10.

Towers, Eleanor, et al. Increase in Poison Center Reports Linked to Kratom-Containing Kava Products – National Poison Data System, United States, 2000-2025. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, April 2, 2026. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/75/wr/mm7512a1.htm?s_cid=OS_mm7512a1_w#print.

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