

# KAVA: THE FACTS

## WHAT IS KAVA?

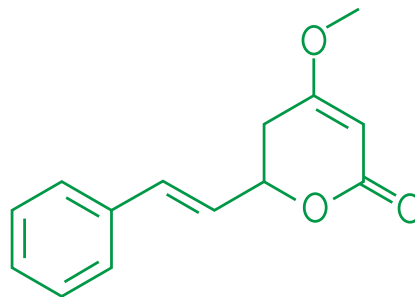
Kava is the common word for the pepper plant, *Piper methysticum*. The root of the kava plant is used to make a drink which acts as a depressant and slows down the brain and nervous system.

Some slang names for kava include awa, grog, kava-kava, kawa, lewena, sakau, waka, wati, yaqona.

Drinking kava is a traditional practice for many Pacific and South Sea Island communities, where it is used during cultural ceremonies, for medicinal purposes, and at social gatherings.

Kava may come in the form of the root of a plant, a brown liquid or powder, or may be added to capsules, drops or drinks.

The active compounds in kava are called kavalactones.



### KAVALACTONES

Ingesting kava in amounts commonly used for traditional purposes is likely to be low risk for most people but prolonged use or combining it with alcohol or other drugs can be dangerous.

## EFFECTS OF KAVA

### SHORT TERM EFFECTS

Kava is absorbed through the gut and reaches its peak effect about 2 hours after ingestion.

- Makes you feel relaxed
- Makes you feel talkative
- Numbness of the mouth
- Tiredness
- Muscle weakness
- Reduced coordination
- Fatigue

### PHYSICAL EFFECTS

- Muscular relaxation
- Sedation
- Sleepiness
- Numbing feeling of the lips, mouth, tongue, or throat
- Lowered cognitive function
- Impaired coordination
- Pupil dilation and red eyes

### PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

- Feel good/relaxed
- Feel talkative

### EFFECTS DEPEND ON...

The effects of kava depend on how much you ingest, how quickly you ingest it, whether you have eaten, your size and weight, your overall

health and how often you use it.

It can also depend on how healthy your liver is. Or whether you use kava with alcohol or other drugs, including prescription medications.

### LONG TERM EFFECTS

If you use kava often for a long time you may:

- Have liver problems
- Lose weight and have nutrition problems
- Experience nausea
- Experience stomach upset
- Have red eyes
- Experience impotence (males)
- Suffer poor overall health
- Feel fatigued
- Suffer low motivation

The way a person uses kava can also cause some problems:

- Ingesting kava at the same time as alcohol may make you feel more drunk than expected and may cause liver damage.
- Ingesting kava at the same time as other drugs (including prescription medications) may increase the levels of those drugs in the body, slow down the removal process and increase the effects. Although the extent to which this occurs is not certain, it may be dangerous.
- Chronic, long-term consumption of kava is associated with increased adverse health effects, such as poor overall health, liver problems, stomach upset, fatigue, impotence (males), weight loss, nausea, red eyes, and low motivation.

## KAVA AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people under 18 years of age may experience greater effects from kava than adults. Kava use by young people may be unsafe. For these reasons, kava use by young people is not recommended.

## HOW IS KAVA USED?

Traditionally, kava is consumed as a drink by Pacific and South Sea Island communities for medicinal, religious, and cultural purposes.

Medicines and supplements containing kava are promoted for the relief of stress, anxiety, and insomnia.

Intravenous injection of kava is not in line with traditional use and may be fatal.



## MIXING KAVA WITH OTHER DRUGS, INCLUDING PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION

Kava has the potential for harmful interactions with other drugs, including some prescription medication. You should speak to your doctor before using kava if you are taking any other medications. If you are already using kava, tell your doctor when they prescribe any new medications.

## PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

There is limited evidence on the safety of kava use during pregnancy and breastfeeding.

The safest option for women who are trying to get pregnant, who are pregnant or who are breastfeeding is to not use kava.



## TOLERANCE AND DEPENDENCE

Evidence suggests that kava is not addictive. However, harmful use of kava, including ongoing, high-level consumption, has been known to occur in certain contexts.

## SELF-HELP ASSOCIATIONS

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs 24 hours, 7 days a week, call the **National Alcohol and Other Drugs hotline: 1800 250 015**.



## MIXING KAVA WITH ALCOHOL

Consuming kava and alcohol at the same time can make you feel more drunk than expected and lead to other harmful effects, such as liver damage. For this reason, mixing, or drinking alcohol at the same time as kava is not recommended.

## HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE TO SOBER UP?

Kava is absorbed quickly after ingestion, taking about two hours to reach its peak effect. Kava persists in the body for over 24 hours after ingestion.

## DRIVING IMPAIRMENT AND KAVA

Kava use (depending on the amount consumed) may affect your perceptions, alertness, and responsiveness and therefore your ability to drive safely. Some studies have shown the use of kava slows speech and movement. Data from some countries suggests that using kava before driving is associated with an increased risk of motor vehicle accidents. Consumption of kava before driving a motor vehicle or operating machinery is

not recommended. If feeling affected by kava avoid driving or using machinery.

Driving under the influence of drugs in NSW carries serious penalties and for the purposes of traffic legislation kava will be defined as a drug. Kava is detectable in blood and urine and drivers deemed by Police to be under the influence of kava (with or without other drugs), may be charged with an offence.



## WHAT SHOULD I DO IN AN EMERGENCY?

If you can't wake someone up or you are concerned that they may have sustained a head injury from a drug related fall – call an ambulance immediately – dial Triple Zero (000).

If the person has been mixing kava with other drugs, including alcohol, tell the NSW Ambulance paramedic exactly what they have taken. Paramedics are there to help. Generally paramedics don't involve the police **unless** there is danger to themselves or other people/children, someone dies, or a crime (such as violence or theft) has been committed.

## KAVA AND THE LAW

Under the Australian New Zealand Food Standard Code, kava can be sold as a food if it is a beverage made by mixing kava and cold water only, or in the form of dried or raw kava root.

Therapeutic products which contain low doses of kava are available in Australia. These products are licensed through the Therapeutic Goods Administration and are used for anxiety, stress, and insomnia.

## INFORMATION AND ADVICE

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs 24 hours, 7 days a week, call the **National Alcohol and Other Drugs hotline: 1800 250 015**. It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in the state or territory you are calling from.

### OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES

- **Nepean Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (NYDAS)** works within a holistic model of care to address a range of issues for young people (12-20 years) of age related to their alcohol and other drug use. Call **(02) 4734 2129** or **(02) 4734 1333**.
- **Poisons Information Centre** is a 24/7 call centre service to NSW and after hours call centre across Australia. Call **13 11 26**.
- **ahmrc.org.au** for Aboriginal community controlled health services across NSW. Go to Members/ Members regional map/ Member services or Member websites.
- **alcohol.gov.au** provides information about related health issues and Australian government policy.
- **druginfo.adf.org.au** for facts and resources on alcohol and other drugs and the prevention of related harm.
- **druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au** State Library of New South Wales provides up to date information for public libraries in NSW.
- **headspace.org.au** for mental health and wellbeing support, information and services for young people (12-25 years) and their family and friends.
- **kidshelp.com.au** is a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5-25 years. Counselling is offered by web, email or call **1800 55 1800**.
- **nuaa.org.au** NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA) is a peak drug user organisation in NSW providing harm reduction information and blood borne virus prevention peer education.
- **au.reachout.com ReachOut** is an Australian online youth mental health service with a mobile-friendly site and forums where you can access help, information and support.
- **shil.nsw.gov.au** for free and confidential sexual health support and information.
- **smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au** Smart Recovery is a voluntary self-help group that assists people in recovering from alcohol, drug use and other addictive behaviours.
- Visit **tafensw.edu.au** for help with education, career development or personal matters. Students can contact a local TAFE / university counsellor. Follow the links to student services, careers and counselling.
- **youthaction.org.au** Youth Action is the peak organisation for young people in NSW. Use the search option to access a directory of NSW youth services.
- **youthsolutions.com.au** for services for young people 12–25 years of age and the community including prevention and health promotion, drug and alcohol education, community programs and referral. You can also call **(02) 4628 2319** [provides services to young people in Macarthur & Wingecarribee].

### RESOURCES FOR FAMILIES

- Visit the **For Families** section on the Your Room website ([yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au](http://yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au)).
- When someone misuses kava, it can affect everyone around them. This site offers a variety of resources for friends and families concerned about their loved ones. Support services are available specifically to help people supporting others with substance use or misuse.
- Informational resources are available in 27 languages. This includes videos providing information about where and how to get help for yourself or someone you care about.

### GENERAL RESOURCES ON THE YOUR ROOM WEBSITE INCLUDE:

- Information and support for family and carers.
- Managing aggression, alcohol and drug use in the home: A guide for those concerned about children 5-12 years.
- Coping with aggression, alcohol and drug use in the home - A guide for teenagers.
- A parents' guide to drug slang.

Download a range of fact sheets from [yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au](http://yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au)