

Fact sheets 2025

What is kava?

Kava is a beverage or extract prepared from the crushed root of the pepper plant (*Piper methysticum*). It comes in various forms, including:

- Brownish-coloured drink
- Brown powder
- Tablets/capsules
- Tea
- Extracts
- Drops.

Kava plays an important cultural role in Pacific Islander communities where it is traditionally cultivated as a ceremonial drink. It was introduced to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in northern Australia in the 1980s as a substitute for alcohol, to reduce alcohol-related harms. In these contexts, kava is used in much the same way as alcohol.

Kava extract is also used in some herbal over-the-counter tablets and preparations for stress and anxiety.

What are the effects?

Kava is a depressant drug, which means it slows down the messages travelling between the brain and the body.

The following may be experienced:

- Feeling happy and relaxed
- Mild sleepiness
- Numb mouth and throat
- Reduced or loss of appetite.

Kava and complementary therapies

Some studies in complementary therapies have shown that kava can reduce symptoms of stress and mild anxiety, enhance mood and improve sleep in the short-term. More studies are needed for kava's effect on severe anxiety. It is not currently recommended as a medicine or treatment for anxiety disorders.

Kava

Kava, kawa, waka, lewena, yaqona, grog (Fiji), sakau (Pohnpei), 'awa (Hawaii), 'ava (Samoa) and wati (New Guinea)



Kava regulations in Australia

Kava tablets or capsules made with kava extract may be sold over the counter as treatment for anxiety, insomnia or stress.

Kava was banned in Australia in 2007 due to concerns over misuse and health problems in First Nations communities. However, many Pacific Islanders who settled in Australia have continued drinking kava or using kava extracts.

In recognition of kava's cultural significance for Pacific Islander communities, the Australian Government launched the Kava Pilot Program in 2019 to increase accessibility of kava into Australia. This program was rolled out in two phases: Phase 1 was implemented in December 2019 and doubled the amount of kava that can be imported by passengers from two kilograms to four kilograms. Phase 2 was implemented in 2021 and allowed the commercial importation of kava into Australia as food.

What are the risks?

On its own and in moderation, kava's side effects are usually mild and include cramping and nausea.

If a large amount is taken the following effects may also be experienced:

- Drowsiness
- Nausea
- Loss of muscle control
- Mild fever
- Liver problems
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Dry, itchy, and scaly skin
- Pupil dilation and red eyes.

There is evidence to suggest that in some reported cases, the effects of kava were severe enough to require liver transplants. People are advised to avoid kava if they:

- Plan to drive or use machinery
- Plan to drink alcohol
- Are caring for children, pregnant or breastfeeding
- Have liver disease.

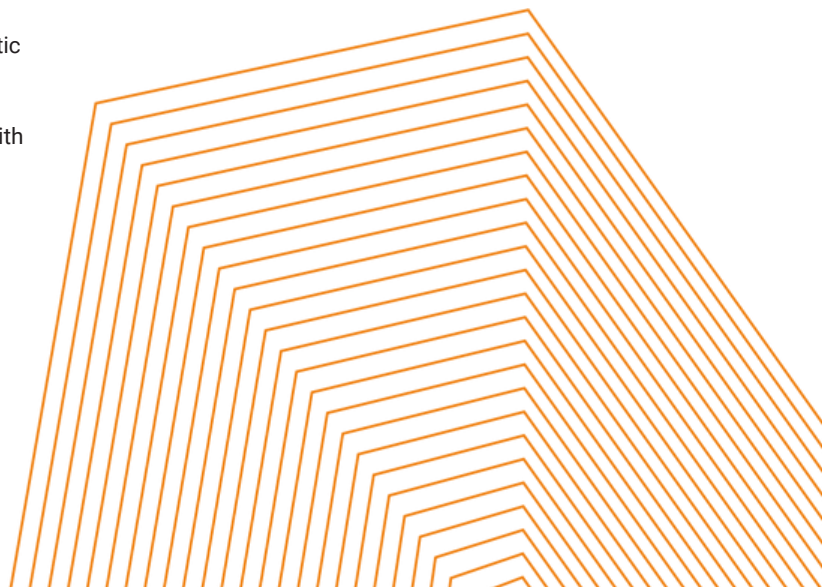
Mixing kava with other drugs

Kava has the potential to interact with several drugs and medications. Risk of harm and unpredictable effects increase when kava is mixed with other drugs like alcohol, benzodiazepines, GHB, opioids or hepatic route drugs.

Kava can cause serious side effects like liver damage when mixed with alcohol and other drugs. Kava has also been shown to cause liver damage when taken in an alcoholic or acetonic extract. Water-based extracts of kava (as a drink or tablet) should not be consumed with alcohol, especially if there is a history of liver damage or disease.

Dependence and withdrawal

Kava dependence is unlikely; however, ongoing and frequent use can cause harm when mixed with other drugs.



Treatment

If you think you may be experiencing some of the symptoms described above as a result of too much kava or feeling unwell after drinking kava, contact your GP immediately.

Kava trends in Australia

Although kava is more accessible due to the pilot program, there is limited evidence to determine use. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS), fewer than one in 100 people (0.8% of the population) aged 14 and over had consumed kava in Australia in the previous 12 months in 2022-2023.

The NDSHS also showed that people in their 30s (1.2%) and 40s (1.3%) were the most likely to have consumed kava in Australia in the previous 12 months. People born in New Zealand and Oceania (excluding Australia) were 6.6 times as likely as people born in Australia to have consumed kava in Australia in the past 12 months.

Results from a separate evaluation report showed that 74% (out of 236 participants) of Pacific Islander community survey participants in Australia had used kava within the last 12 months.

Emergency info

If you, or someone around you, is experiencing undesired or distressing psychological or physical symptoms from the intake of alcohol or other drugs please seek immediate medical attention.

If you need urgent help from ambulance services call Triple Zero (000). If a person has been mixing drugs with alcohol or other drugs, tell the paramedic exactly what has been taken.

Services

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs, call the National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline on 1800 250 015.

The hotline will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in your state or territory.

More resources

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) is an Australian monitoring system run by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at UNSW Sydney that identifies emerging trends of local and national concern in illicit drug markets. Visit unsw.to/IDRS

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) is an Australian monitoring system run by NDARC that identifies emerging trends of local and national interest in ecstasy and related drug use, markets and harms. Visit unsw.to/EDRS

The Pocket Guide to Drugs and Health is a publication authored by experts from NDARC that provides information for health professionals on the impact of drug use. Visit silverbackpublishing.org/products/the-pocket-guide-to-drugs-and-health

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare collects information on alcohol and tobacco consumption, and illicit drug use among the general population in Australia. Visit aihw.gov.au

The Australian Bureau of Statistics is Australia's national statistical agency, providing official statistics on a range of economic, social, population and environmental matters of importance to Australia. Visit abs.gov.au

Sources

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