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for a general audience

Kava

Introduction

In some countries in the Pacific region, such as Fiji, Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea, kava drinking is an important cultural practice. In these cultures, kava drinking plays a role in strengthening social ties.

Many Pacific Islanders who have settled in Australia continue their cultural practice of drinking kava, and in recent decades other Australians have taken up kava drinking, or using products containing kava extracts.

Like any other drug, excessive use of kava can cause problems for a person's health and well being, and can affect the people around them. Kava can make a person feel relaxed and sleepy, but it can also cause problems with health, relationships, work and finances if used excessively. Legal problems can also add to a person's stress levels and affect their family, as people may not be aware they require licenses and permits to import and sell kava.

This fact sheet provides general information about kava and its effects.

What is kava?

Kava (*Piper methysticum*) is a shrub belonging to the pepper family, Piperaceae. The root or stump of the shrub contains kavalactones, which have sedative and muscle-relaxant effects.

Street/other names

Kava is also known as "kava kava", *kawa* (Fiji), *waka* (Fiji), *lewena* (Fiji), *yaqona* (Fiji), *grog* (Fiji), *sakau* (Pohnpei), *'awa* (Hawaii), *'ava* (Samoa) and *wati* (New Guinea).

How is kava used?

Traditionally, Pacific Islanders crushed, chewed and ground the root and stump of the shrub, then soaked it in cold water to produce a drink for use in ceremonies and other cultural practices. Kava-drinking rituals helped to strengthen ties among groups,

to reaffirm status and rank in the community, and to communicate with the spirits.

Kava drinking in Australia

In the 1980s, kava was introduced in Australian Indigenous communities in the north of Australia. It was thought that substituting alcohol with kava would reduce alcohol consumption and alcohol-related harms. In a similar manner to the Pacific Islanders' traditional use, powdered kava was mixed with water and people sat in a circle and took turns in drinking from the bowl.

These days, kava drinking is not limited to ceremonies and traditional use. It is often used more heavily and for its sedative, hypnotic and muscle-relaxant effects, in much the same way that alcohol is used.

Kava extract

Kava extract is used in some herbal preparations. These manufactured tablets and preparations are sold as over-the-counter medicines to treat insomnia and to relieve stress and anxiety.

What are the physical effects of kava?

Kava acts as a sedative and muscle relaxant. Drinking it in moderate amounts can make a person feel happy, sleepy and relaxed. It can also numb the mouth and throat and reduce the person's appetite.

Drinking large amounts of kava may result in a loss of muscle control, feeling very sleepy and feeling nauseous.

Excessive use of kava has been associated with a number of health-related problems. Some of the unpleasant side effects include:

- bloodshot eyes
- dry, scaly skin
- malnutrition and severe weight loss
- increased susceptibility to infections
- loss of muscle control

- shortness of breath
- chest pains
- high blood pressure
- liver and kidney damage.

Manufactured products containing kava extract have been linked to irreversible liver damage. Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) recommends that anyone at risk of liver damage or who has an existing liver condition should avoid taking preparations containing kava. If you are taking any preparation containing kava, contact your health practitioner if you experience any unexplained symptoms or side effects, including:

- loss of appetite
- unusual tiredness
- mild fever
- nausea, vomiting or an upset stomach
- bruising or bleeding that can't be explained
- jaundice.

What are the psychological effects of kava?

Excessive use of kava has been associated with mood swings and a general state of apathy. Psychological problems such as depression and schizophrenia may be complicated by excessive use of kava.

What are the social effects of kava?

Excessive use of kava can lead to a range of social problems that can impact on a person's family, friends, work, school and financial situation.

Family and relationship problems may arise when a person spends large amounts of time in kava drinking sessions and less time with their family. This problem can be made worse if the person then comes home and sleeps instead of spending time with, and looking after, their family. Family members may become frustrated when the person does not realise the problems their kava drinking is causing.

The general state of apathy that may occur from excessive kava use can result in **problems with work or school**, as the person may not be working or studying efficiently. The sedative effects of kava can also result in unsafe working conditions, especially if driving taxis or operating heavy machinery.

People who consume large amounts of kava may also take more sick days because they are suffering from some of the health problems associated with excessive kava use.

Some people spend large amounts of money buying kava, which can result in **financial difficulties** and increased pressure on the family if there is not enough money left over to buy food and other essentials.

Is kava legal?

The import, advertising and sale of kava in Australia are strictly controlled. Kava is listed as a controlled substance under the Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations Act. It may only be imported into and sold in Australia by a person who has the appropriate licenses and permits.

A person wishing to import kava must hold both a License to Import and a Permit to Import a controlled substance. Before the kava arrives in Australia, each shipment requires a Permit to Import, which cannot be issued unless a person already has a license.

Manufactured products containing kava extract also require a license and permit to import.

Travellers to Australia who are aged 18 years or over can bring up to two kilograms of kava (for non-therapeutic purposes) without a license or permit, provided it is in their accompanying baggage.

Travellers can bring manufactured over-the-counter preparations containing kava extract (for therapeutic purposes) into Australia for personal use. The maximum amount of therapeutic kava is a three-month supply at the maximum recommended daily dose.

Western Australia and the Northern Territory have additional restrictions on the importation of kava. Anyone wishing to import kava into these areas will need to obtain clearance from the relevant State or Territory Health Authority.

Further information

For more information about kava, alcohol and other drugs, see the DrugInfo website at www.druginfo.adf.org.au. For translated resources and the Victorian Multicultural Drug and Alcohol Service Directory, see the Multicultural DrugInfo website at www.druginfo.adf.org.au/multicultural.