

The unfiltered, unregulated truth of kava root products

Marketed as a non-alcoholic option for older teens and adults, drinks and supplements with kava root have gained popularity in the last few years.

Manufacturers say the items will help consumers relieve anxiety, decrease stress, become relaxed and even fight addiction. However, there's major concern about the negative side effects these products can have. They can be bought as drinks, like the Feel Free Classic, or in pill form with powder from the kava plant inside.

The California Department of Public Health [says](#) kava's active ingredient, kavalactones, contain sedative and psychoactive (mind-altering) properties.

Erica Dawkins, a clinical dietitian with OSF HealthCare, dives into the additional health concerns that have been widely reported to have a connection to kava.

"We're seeing nausea and vomiting, dizziness, gastrointestinal distress. Some people are having trouble with their vision," Dawkins says. "Because of all these kavalactones, or active ingredients, some of them tend to damage the liver. Because we're seeing some extra liver damage going on, if you're also taking other medicines, supplements, or drinking alcohol, which can also damage the liver, we're seeing an exacerbated effect of that, too."

In 2002, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) [issued](#) a consumer advisory about dietary supplements containing kava, saying they might be associated with severe liver injury and hepatotoxicity (hepatitis, cirrhosis, liver failure).

Nearly two decades later, the FDA released a [memorandum](#) concluding that there's enough data to suggest that using kava for "recreational" or "relaxation" purposes "is not safe for human consumption." It lists kava as an unapproved food additive when used as an ingredient in conventional foods.

In addition to the concerning reports released by the FDA, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) [reports](#) that chronic use in large quantities may cause "dry scaly skin or yellow skin discoloration." This is known as kava dermopathy, as well as causing tremors or other abnormal body movement.

"The safety of these supplements aren't as closely regulated by the FDA," Dawkins says. "So, I would be very careful and talk to a physician about any alternatives before going down that route."

Kava is native to the South Pacific and is a member of the pepper family, the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, a section of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), [reports](#).

Traditionally, kava would be used in ceremonial, social and medical situations. Dawkins says how it's being produced today offers an added layer of danger.

"Boiled down again, no pun intended, to the way it's being made and manufactured. Back in the traditional sense, a lot of times the root was dried or grounded and then extracted with pure water. Nowadays it's extracted with alcohol or acetone (colorless, solvent liquid)," Dawkins says. "When it's extracted with those things, you can get a larger amount and an amount that's much more potent and effective than if it were done in the traditional sense."

Dawkins says to speak with your medical provider about speaking with a therapist or counselor. There are other medications out there which can respond more safely and effectively to the issues you're facing, instead of an unregulated product.