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Kava kava (methistine pepper) - properties, action, side effects



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MAY 13, 2022

Is there a natural antidepressant that improves your mood and makes you feel relaxed? Yes! This is the kava kava plant, known in Poland as methystine pepper. Due to its psychoactive effect, kava kava is one of the controversial plant raw materials whose legal status in Poland changes frequently. The article discusses, inter alia, the origin of methystine pepper, properties, uses and side effects, as well as its current legal status.





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Contents

What is kava kava?

Types of mestizo pepper

What are the properties of kava kava?

The use of kava kava

Is kava kava legal in Poland and in the world?

Who Shouldn't Eat Methistine Pepper?

What are the side effects of taking methistine pepper?

What is kava kava?

Kava kava , or methistine **pepper** (*Piper methysticum*) is a plant from the pepper family. It takes the form of an evergreen shrub, 3 to 7 m high and 2 to 5 m wide. The parts of the shrub that are famous for their positive properties are the roots and rhizomes.

The name of the plant is a bit misleading as it is associated with invigorating coffee. In fact, the effect of kava kava is the opposite of the known stimulant. The taste is bitter, which is suggested by its native name. Ava means

bitter taste in Polynesian .

Where does methistine pepper come from?

Methistine pepper comes from **the islands of Polynesia** , which are located in the Pacific. The following islands are mainly famous for it:

- Vanuatu;
- Fiji;
- French Polynesia;
- Hawaii;
- Micronesia.

What substances does kava kava contain?

In the kava kava plant, biologically active substances called **kavalactones** can be found . So far, 18 of them have been detected. These include, among others: dihydrocavaine, dihydromethysticin, jangonin and caffeine. The higher the content of kavalactones, the stronger the effect. The highest concentration of these substances is found in the **roots of kava kava** .

In addition to cavalactones, the plant also contains small amounts of **chalcones** and **alkaloids** .

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Types of mestizo pepper

Methistine pepper comes in different varieties. It is worth remembering that each of them differs in the content of individual cavalactones, and thus in their action. There are, among others:

- **noble kava** , which is the only variety that is used and consumed routinely by the native inhabitants of the Pacific islands. To prepare the drink, they grind the kava roots finely, mix the powder with water and strain it using mesh bags;
- wild varieties of **wichmannii** and **two-day kava** banned for export .



What are the properties of kava kava?

Properties that are famous for methistine pepper can be conventionally divided into:

- **cultural** - in the past, only selected social groups could consume the kava drink. For centuries it was a certain ritual at ceremonies. Nowadays, in the Western Pacific islands, infusions of methistine pepper are still being drunk. Some people use it as an everyday drink, others use the properties of kava only occasionally as a substitute for alcohol;
- **medicinal** , used, inter alia, in the treatment of sleep problems, the treatment of **anxiety** , mood disorders and premenstrual symptoms;
- **relaxing** , related to the functioning of the limbic system.

How does kava kava work?

The discussed raw material has an effect on the **central nervous system** . The effect of kava depends on the dose taken. In therapeutic doses, methistine pepper has a number of **positive effects on the human body** , including:

- makes it easier to fall asleep;
- improves mood and sleep quality;
- increases sensitivity to delicate sounds;
- relieves anxiety;
- has analgesic, anticonvulsant, diastolic and diuretic properties.

According to the current knowledge, despite its psychoactive effect, **taking kava in small doses is not a risk of addiction** .

Kava kava helps you feel carefree and happy. Unlike alcohol, it allows you to maintain clarity of mind, as shown by a Hawaiian proverb. It proclaims that whoever drinks kava remains human, while whoever drinks alcohol becomes a beast.

Read also: [Great Oman - medicinal properties, application, contraindications](#)

The use of kava kava

Traditional use has involved using chewed and fermented roots to prepare a **ceremonial drink** with a calming and mental alert effect.

Sources say that it is currently used internally in medicine, incl. in cases of urinary infections, **arthritis** and rheumatism. On the other hand, the external use of kava kava relieves joint pain.

Is kava kava legal in Poland and in the world?

The kava drinking culture has a long tradition in the islands of Polynesia. In the early 2000s, there were disturbing reports of a toxic effect of methystine pepper on the liver, which resulted in a temporary ban on its sale. Fortunately, extensive research has not provided evidence of the hepatotoxicity of kava, which has again become legal in Australia, Europe and the United States.

In the world you can meet the so-called **kava bars** , i.e. places where products prepared from the powdered roots of the noble kava kava plant are served, including drinks.

In Poland, the legal status of kava changed quite dynamically. For a long time, methystine pepper was listed as a drug of high addiction potential, prohibited by the 2009 Act on Counteracting Drug Addiction.

Seven years later, a team of specialists dealing with the risk assessment of psychoactive substances issued a recommendation to restore the legality of methystine pepper in Poland.

We had to wait for success until 2018, when, under the ordinance of the Minister of Health of August 17 on the list of psychotropic substances, narcotic drugs and new psychoactive substances, **methistine pepper was excluded from the list of narcotic substances** , and its possession was legalized.

Currently, pursuant to Resolution No. 6/2021, methistine pepper has been classified as **a plant raw material, prohibited for use in dietary supplements** . In fact, preparations made from powdered kava kava noble roots can be purchased online, provided that they are preparations for external use only.

Also read: [Gotu kola \(Asian pennywort, cica\) - properties, preparations, price](#)

Who Shouldn't Eat Methistine Pepper?

Taking methistine pepper should be carefully considered and discussed with your doctor. Preparations containing kava kava must not be taken in the pharmacological treatment of mental disorders, including depression and anxiety disorders. The ban is justified as methistine pepper may **interfere with the effect of antidepressants** . In addition, the use of methistine pepper is excluded in the following cases:

- pregnancy and breastfeeding;
- history of hypersensitivity to cavalactones.

What a

Some may experience some **side effects** after consuming methistine pepper . The most common are:

- headache and dizziness;
- **diarrhea** ;
- increased sleepiness;
- symptoms visible on the skin.

The harmful effects of methistine pepper are mainly associated with the intake of:

- other herbal substances as well as certain groups of drugs;
- kava kava plant raw materials derived from uncontrolled crops with heavy metal contamination;
- mold contamination of the raw material.

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