



Trying to Reduce Both Depression and Anxiety? Kava can!

Last year the journal of Psychopharmacology released a study showing that aqueous preparations of Kava (*Piper methysticum*) were safely used to reduce anxiety and depression. Their conclusion found Kava's abilities "highly significant" with a "substantial effect size", when compared with the effectiveness of a placebo, and without adverse effects on the liver when used for a short duration.

This study was reportedly the first human clinical trial to assess anti-depressive and anxiety lowering effects from ingesting tablets made from an aqueous extract of Kava while also assessing liver safety. Researchers gathered 60 adult participants who had suffered with at least one month of elevated generalized anxiety for this 3-week, placebo-controlled, double-blind crossover trial. Dubbed the "Kava Anxiety Depression Spectrum Study", participants had either five placebos or five tablets of Kava a day, which each had 50 mg of kavalactones for a therapeutic daily total of 250 mg of kavalactones a day. Kavalactones, also called "kava pyrones", come from a resin of the Kava's dried root, which originates from islands in the Pacific Ocean. They are believed to be the most therapeutically significant constituent of the plant and are accordingly the benchmark by which standardization of supplements is made.

Results from the study were very impressive with the aqueous extract of Kava showing highly significant relative reductions of anxiety and depression across several scaling systems. The data used for evaluation was collected on weekly clinical assessments and self-rating questionnaires. Scoring systems used in the assessment included the Hamilton Anxiety Score, which has been widely used for decades in both clinical and research settings, with participants' symptoms being reduced by -9.9 when compared with the placebo, which lowered scores only -0.8. Other highly significant improvements were observed using the Beck Anxiety Inventory and the Montgomery-Asberg Depression Rating Scale.

Findings such as these are not new to research with Kava. The efficacy of standardized kava liquid extracts, which use alcohol as a solvent and preservative, has been well documented in animal and human studies. It has repeatedly been shown to decrease

anxiety and relax the body without loss of mental acuity. In fact, Kava has traditionally been used for centuries in its indigenous areas as a ceremonial and intoxicating drink. It was even commented on by the famous eighteenth century explorer Captain James Cook during his voyage through the South Seas. However, this study reported being the first clinical trial to specifically examine the anti-anxiety and anti-depressive abilities of an aqueous extract from Kava.

Another purpose of this study was to address the ongoing controversy over Kava's potentially toxic effects on the liver, called hepatotoxicity. In recent years, Kava has been withdrawn from European, Canadian, and British markets due to concerns over hepatotoxicity and the World Health Organization recommended further research into aqueous extracts of the herb. Many professionals believe hepatotoxicity is very rare and such regulations excessive. For example, in 2008 The European Journal of Gastroenterology and Hepatology published a study, which reviewed causal relationships among 26 patients who experienced liver damage while using Kava. Causality was assessed using criteria of the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences for objective probability scoring. Ultimately, only one case was unequivocally verified because others had not adhered to the regulatory recommendations for the prescribed dosing, duration time of treatment, or had cases clouded by use of other medications at the time of liver injury.

While the three-week Kava Anxiety Depression Spectrum Study raised no major health concerns regarding the extract used, researchers believed larger studies were required to confirm the herb's safety. The lead researcher, in an interview posted on www.elements4health.com, implicated an erroneous extraction process itself as the possible cause of health concerns with Kava in recent years. "Ethanol and acetone extracts, which sometimes use the incorrect parts of the Kava, were being sold in Europe. That is not the traditional way of prescribing Kava in the Pacific Islands. Our study used a water-soluble extract from the peeled rootstock of a medicinal cultivar of the plant, which is approved by the Therapeutic Goods-Administration of Australia and is currently legal in Australia for medicinal use".

In conclusion, while the research continues to mount on the safety and efficacy of Kava, therapeutic use of the herb should be done under the guidance of a knowledgeable physician who is adequately trained in botanical medicine.

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