

Kava

What is kava?

Kava (*Piper methysticum*) is a plant native to the Pacific Islands that has been used as a ceremonial and relaxing drink by people of that region for centuries. The traditional kava drink is prepared from water extracts of the raw kava root or rhizome. It is commonly prepared by mixing powdered kava with water.

Kava, also known as *Piper methysticum* or kava-kava is also contained in some medicinal products such as tablets, capsules and tea bags for the treatment of anxiety.

Kava laws in the ACT

Kava (including the traditional kava drink) is a 'prescription only medicine' in the ACT under the *Medicines, Poisons and Therapeutic Goods Act 2008*.

A prescription only medicine can only be used or supplied in accordance with a valid prescription. This means that use of traditional kava in the ACT is effectively prohibited, unless it is prescribed by a doctor or used in connection with a Ministerial exemption.

Some medicinal products containing kava such as herbal tablets and tea bags are available for use without a prescription.

Health risks associated with kava

When consumed, kava can have a sedative or anesthetic like effect. Kava can cause nausea (feeling sick), sleepiness and reduced muscle control. People under the effects of kava should not drive a vehicle or operate machinery.

Long term, heavy use of kava has been associated with a range of health problems including kidney and liver damage, loss of appetite, breathing difficulties and skin lesions.

Because the full health effects of kava are not known, some literature suggests that kava should be avoided by:

- children;
- people who are taking prescription or over-the-counter medicines;
- pregnant or breastfeeding women;
- people with existing liver, heart or lung conditions; and
- people consuming alcohol.

Exemption for some public events

The ACT Government acknowledges the cultural importance of traditional kava use for Pacific Island people. This is why an exemption has been made under the Medicines, Poisons and Therapeutic Goods Regulation 2008 to allow for the cultural use of kava at specified public events, as declared by the Minister for Health. The National Multicultural Festival is currently the only public event where the use of kava is permitted.

The possession, supply or use of kava is otherwise prohibited in the ACT.

Traditional kava preparations cannot be legally used for private or social events.

Importing kava

In accordance with the *Customs (Prohibited Imports) Regulations 1956 (Cth)* it is illegal to import kava into Australia without an import permit from the Commonwealth Department of Health. Import permits are only issued for medical and/or scientific purposes.

There is an exemption that allows an incoming passenger on a ship or aircraft to import kava into Australia without an import permit if:

- the incoming passenger is aged 18 years or over;
- the kava is in either root or dried powder form;
- the amount of kava does not exceed 2 kilograms; and
- the kava is carried in the passenger's accompanied baggage.

Please visit the Commonwealth Department of Health website www.health.gov.au and the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service website www.customs.gov.au for further information about the importation of kava.

References

Legislative documents relating to the use of kava can be found at www.legislation.act.gov.au

- *Medicines, Poisons and Therapeutic Goods Act 2008*.
- Medicines, Poisons and Therapeutic Goods Regulation 2008.
- Medicines, Poisons and Therapeutic Goods (Public Event for Kava Exemption) Declaration 2013 (No 2).

Further information

For further information about the use of kava in the ACT, please contact Pharmaceutical Services, Health Protection Service on (02) 6205 0998 or email hps@act.gov.au.

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