

April 2026
DEA/DC/DOE

KAVA

(Other Names: Ava, Intoxicating Pepper, Kawa Kawa, Kew, Sakau, Tonga, Yangona)

Introduction:

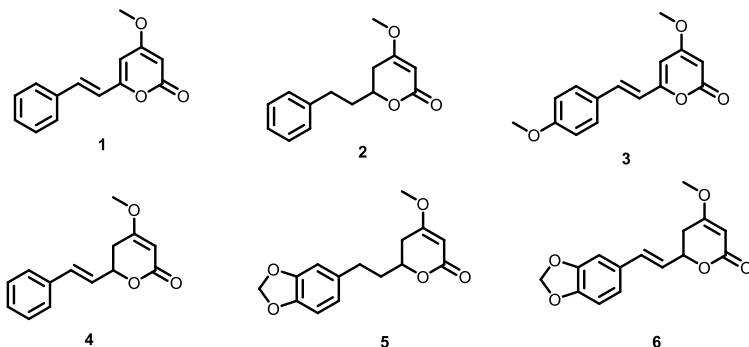
Kava, also known as *Piper methysticum* (intoxicating pepper), is a perennial shrub native to the South Pacific Islands, including Hawaii (Hawaiian: 'awa). Kava is harvested for its rootstock, which contains pharmacologically active kavalactones. The term 'kava' also refers to the non-fermented, psychoactive beverage prepared from the rootstock. For many centuries, Pacific Island societies have consumed kava beverages for social, ceremonial, and medical purposes. Traditionally, kava beverages are prepared by chewing or pounding the rootstock to produce a cloudy, milky pulp that is then soaked in water before the liquid is filtered to drink.

Licit Uses:

In the United States, kava is sold as a dietary supplement that is promoted as a natural alternative to anti-anxiety drugs and sleeping pills. The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not approved any kava-related products for any medical indication. In 2020, FDA concluded that indiscriminate use of kava either as a "recreational" or "relaxation" beverage is not safe for human consumption, and the use of kava as an ingredient in traditional foods is not Generally Recognized as Safe.

Chemistry:

Kava is known for the presence of kavalactones, of which twenty kavalactones and nine kavalactone dimers have been identified. Only six major kavalactones account for approximately 96% of the total lipid extract from kava. These major kavalactones are desmethoxyyangonin (**1**), dihydrokavain (**2**), yangonin (**3**), kavain (**4**), dihydromethysticin (**5**), and methysticin (**6**). The structures of those 6 major kavalactones are shown below:



Pharmacology:

The kavalactones are the primary mediator of kava's effects. Evidence suggests the kavalactones work by enhancing gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) signaling in the brain.

Kava's psychoactive effects are generally considered mild, and include feelings of calm or relaxation, feeling intoxicated, euphoria, drowsiness, and pain alleviation. Additional effects may include gastrointestinal upset, nausea/vomiting, loss of appetite, agitation, sweating, fatigue, dizziness, headaches, and fast heart rate. Some individuals experience numbing or tingling of the mouth upon drinking kava due to its local anesthetic action. High doses of kavalactones can also produce transient central nervous system depressant effects (e.g., sedation, muscle weakness).

Chronic use of kava in large quantities may cause dry scaly skin or yellow skin discoloration known as kava dermopathy. Such use may also cause extrapyramidal effects (e.g., tremor, abnormal body movement) and liver toxicity. Cases involving liver damage (hepatitis and cirrhosis) and liver failure have been associated with commercial extract preparations of kava. In 2002, FDA issued an advisory alerting consumers and healthcare providers to the potential risk of liver-related injuries associated with the use of kava dietary supplements.

Kava has the potential for causing drug interactions, which may enhance toxicities associated with pharmaceutical agents and other herbal remedies. Said another way, using kava with other drugs or alcohol may increase the risk for harmful effects.

Illicit Uses:

Kava is increasingly used for recreational purposes as self-treatment and/or to relax and achieve an altered/intoxicated state.

America's Poison Centers reported 106 case mentions and 75 single exposures associated with kava in 2016. The numbers increased to 130 case mentions and 76 single exposures in 2022 and 181 case mentions and 98 single exposures in 2024.

User Population:

Information on the user population in the United States is limited. A 2025 publication describing a nationwide survey indicated past-year kava users were more likely to be younger adults with higher education and income than past-year non-users. Compared to non-kava users, this survey showed a strong trend of kava users reporting the use of integrative medicine and other natural products to improve quality of life.

Illicit Distribution:

Kava is widely available on the internet and in retail shops. Some websites that promote and sell kava products also sell other psychoactive products, such as *Salvia divinorum* or kratom. Several kava bars and lounges in the United States sell kava drinks.

Kava is usually ingested orally. Kava is available as whole root, powdered root, tablets, capsules, vapes, gummies, extracts (powder, paste, and liquid), tea bags, prepared drinks, and instant powdered drink mix. Kava is frequently found in products containing a variety of herbs, vitamins, or both.

DEA's National Forensic Laboratory Information System (NFLIS) Drug database collects scientifically verified data on drug items and cases submitted to and analyzed by participating federal, state, and local forensic drug laboratories. NFLIS-Drug received its first and only report of kava in 2020. Moreover, NFLIS-Drug also received 5 reports of kavain since 2019 and 2 reports of dihydrokavain since 2024 (reports to NFLIS-Drug are still pending for 2025 and 2026).

Control Status:

Kava is not controlled under the Controlled Substances Act.

Comments and additional information are welcomed by the Drug and Chemical Evaluation Section; Fax 571-362-4250, Telephone 571-362-3249, or Email DPE@dea.gov.