What do you know about valerian? [1]

Alice,

What do you know about the new alternative herb called "valerian"?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Valerian is an herb that has actually been used as a mild tranquilizer and sleep aid for over 1,000 years, mainly in Europe. It's derived from the dried rhizome (root-like portion) and roots of the Valeriana officinalis plant, a tall perennial herb that has a distinct aroma that some people may find unpleasant. Some studies conducted indicate that valerian may help those suffering from insomnia or other sleep disorders; however, because of small sample sizes and varying amounts of valerian being used, these findings are not conclusive. Although numerous studies of the herb have been conducted, what causes valerian's exact calming mechanism remains unknown. Some scientists believe that valerian increases the amount of gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA ? a chemical that can have a calming effect) in the brain.

In order to prepare the dietary supplement, the rhizome (underground stem), the stolons, and roots are carefully dried. The dried materials are then used in teas, tinctures, extracts, capsules, or tablets. In the United States, valerian is considered a dietary supplement and is therefore not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). However, they list it as "Generally Recognized As Safe.? In Germany, herbal remedies are studied to a greater extent than they are in other countries, including the United States. The German Commission E has approved it as a mild sedative. Valerian is among their approved remedies for unrest and anxiety-produced sleep disturbances. As stated, valerian is generally believed to be safe. However, you might want to consider the following if you are thinking of trying it:

- If you are taking any prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medications, other herbal supplements, recreational drugs, and/or alcohol, it?s best to talk with a health care provider before using valerian as interactions could result in negative effects. For example, folks who are taking other sedative medications may experience an additive affect (meaning the supplement can increase the sedative effect of these drugs).
- Due to its sedating effect, it's recommended that you do not take valerian if you're going to drive or operate heavy machinery.
- Some people experience a paradoxical reaction when taking valerian ? in other words, it
makes them more anxious rather than more relaxed.

- Some studies indicate that users feel effects of valerian right away, while others report that it takes a couple of weeks. Therefore, it's unknown how quickly someone will experience an effect.
- While few side effects are indicated, some users have reported experiencing headaches, dizziness, and gastrointestinal issues.
- In most people, valerian does not seem to cause dependency. However, some who have taken it over a long period of time notice withdrawal when they stop. If you are using it and would like to stop, you may want to gradually reduce your dosage over time.
- Pregnant or breastfeeding women, children, and those with impaired liver function are advised against taking valerian.
- If sleep disturbances are caused by significant anxieties, sleep aids may not be the only solution. You might consider talking with a mental health professional to work out issue(s) associated with anxiety as a more successful long-term treatment. Check out Stress, anxiety, and learning to cope [2] for more information.

If you decide to try valerian to help you sleep, it's recommended that you take it about one to two hours before you hit the sack. When taking a supplement, it's best to follow the instructions on the label. However, since herbal supplements are not regulated by the government, it's difficult to be certain of the potency of any herbal preparation manufactured and sold in the United States. For more information on valerian and other herbal supplements, check out the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine website [3].

Here's to getting a good night of rest!

Alice!

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Published date:
May 05, 2000
Last reviewed on:
Jan 23, 2015

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