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Memorial Sloan Kettering
Cancer Center

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Valerian may provide modest improvements in sleep, but study results are mixed.

Valerian is sold as a dietary supplement for calmness and to improve sleep quality. It has a distinct odor that some may find unpleasant. In lab studies, valerian extract appears to have calming effects related to the nervous system. Studies in humans suggest valerian products have a modest effect on sleep quality.

Valerian products may interact with some drugs or health conditions. More research is needed to determine the benefits and safety of this botanical.

What are the potential uses and benefits?

- To treat anxiety
There is not enough evidence to determine whether valerian can treat anxiety.
- To treat insomnia
Valerian may provide modest improvements in sleep quality. Although a study in cancer patients did not find this to be true, valerian appeared to improve other symptoms such as fatigue, how long it took to fall asleep, and quantity of sleep per night.
- To calm muscle spasms
A small study suggests valerian may be helpful for menstrual cramps, but additional studies are needed.
- To treat menopausal symptoms
A few studies suggest valerian may improve hot flashes and insomnia in postmenopausal women.

What are the side effects?

Occasional, anecdotal, or possibly related:

- Bitter taste
- Daytime drowsiness/dullness
- Depression
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness
- Headache
- Heart palpitations
- Impaired alertness
- Irritability
- Liver toxicity
- Sweating

What else do I need to know?

Patient Warnings:

- Valerian should be stopped at least 1 week before surgery because it can interfere with general anesthesia.
- Patients should not drive or operate dangerous machinery after taking valerian because it could disrupt the ability to process information, perform tasks, or be alert.
- Withdrawal symptoms may occur in those taking valerian for a period of time, if valerian is discontinued abruptly.

Do Not Take if:

- You are taking barbiturates, benzodiazepines, or other CNS drugs to treat anxiety, insomnia, seizures, or psychiatric disorders: Valerian lengthens sedation time of these drugs and may have other added effects.
- You are taking haloperidol: An animal study suggests valerian may increase effects and cause liver damage. Clinical relevance has yet to be determined.
- You have pancreatic, liver, or gallbladder disease: There have been case reports of liver damage and pancreatic infection with valerian use.
- You are driving or operating machinery: Valerian may affect your performance or functioning.
- You are pregnant or nursing: Animal experiments have shown reduced levels of essential micronutrients in fetal mouse brain tissue.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

Valerian - Last updated on November 21, 2023

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