Herbal kava: reports of liver toxicity

Reason for posting: Health Canada advises that products containing kava should not be used. The drug is used in a variety of herbal and homeopathic preparations to induce relaxation, treat anxiety or induce sleep. Health Canada is unaware of any kava-related adverse events in Canada, but the US Food and Drug Administration recently issued a warning letter about 25 reports of serious liver toxicity in Germany and Switzerland, including cases of cirrhosis, hepatitis and liver failure. It also cited a case in the United States of a previously healthy young woman who required a liver transplant after using a kava-containing supplement.

The drug: Kava lactones, also known as kava pyrones, are derived from the dried root and rhizome of Piper methysticum. Kava extract is used in traditional recreational drinks in many South Pacific countries. In Western societies, kava is used as an over-the-counter anxiolytic, muscle relaxant, mood enhancer, sedative or treatment for premenstrual syndrome. It is sold under different ingredient names (see box).

The Health Canada safety assessment concluded that kava may be more effective than placebo as an anxiolytic in the short term through an unknown mechanism; the effect may be reversible upon cessation of the drug. Other possible adverse effects include ataxia, hair loss, hearing loss and anorexia.

Health Canada is conducting a safety assessment to determine whether additional action (e.g., product recall) is required regarding kava-containing products. In the meantime, consumers are advised not to use these products.

What to do: Physicians are asked to review cases of patients with liver toxicity and report any adverse events that may be related to the use of kava to Health Canada. Patients with signs or symptoms of possible liver disease should be asked about their use of herbal remedies. Also, physicians treating patients for stress, anxiety, insomnia or premenstrual syndrome should ask about self-treatment with herbal remedies and warn about risks related to kava. Physicians practising travel medicine may wish to warn patients (particularly those with liver disease, regular users of alcohol, those with Parkinson’s disease or those using benzodiazepines or antipsychotic drugs) who will be visiting areas where kava is used recreationally of the potential exposures and risks.

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References

The many names of kava

ava
ava pepper
ava root
awa
gea
gi
intoxicating pepper
intoxicating long pepper
kao
kava kava
kava root
kavain
kava pepper
kavapipar
kawa
kawa kava
kawa pepper
kawapfeffer
kew
Piper methysticum
Macropiper latifolium
Piper inebrians
maori kava
malohu
maluk
meruk
mili
tauschpfeifer
rhizoma di kava-kava
sakau
tonga
wurzelstock
yagona
yangona
yaqona
yongona

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