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 been used to treat sleep disorders and as a mild tranquilizer for over 1,000 years, mainly in Europe. It's derived from the dried rhizome (underground stem) and roots of the *Valeriana officinalis* plant, a tall perennial herb that has a distinct aroma that some people may find unpleasant. Some studies 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. Valerian's exact calming mechanism also remains unknown. The constituents (parts of the plant that have a medicinal effect) and especially the volatile oils included in valerian roots seem to contribute to the sedating properties of the herb. Some scientists believe that valerian increases the amount of gamma aminobutyric acid (GABA), a chemical that can have a calming effect, in the brain. Certain studies have shown that valerian may weakly bind to the GABA receptors in the brain to exert a sedating action on the central nervous system, which might explain why it may help some people deal with stress.

In order to prepare the dietary supplement, the rhizome, the stems at the surface level, 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 therefore isn't 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. If you want to try it, you may consider the following first:

- If you're taking any prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medications, other herbal supplements, recreational drugs, 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 effect (meaning the
supplement can increase the sedative effect of these drugs).

- Due to its sedating effect, it's recommended that you don't 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 of regular usage. 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 doesn't seem to cause dependency. However, for those who have been using it for extended periods of time, there have been reports of experiencing heart symptoms after abruptly ending its usage. If you're using it and would like to stop, you may want to gradually reduce your dosage over time.
- People who are pregnant, breastfeeding, or are children may want to speak with a health care provider before using, as there isn't currently any research to indicate its safety for those groups. For those with impaired liver function, it's best to avoid this supplement.
- 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 address issue(s) associated with anxiety as a more successful long-term treatment.

In terms of dosage, there's no definitive answer. Studies on the most effective dosage of valerian have been unclear, as some of these studies weren't done rigorously and the dosages in the studies varied. As a result, there hasn't been conclusive evidence as to what the appropriate dosage is or how long to take it. When taking a supplement, it's best to speak with your health care provider about what's most appropriate for you and to follow the instructions on the label. However, since herbal supplements aren't 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 [2].

In addition, it may be more helpful to look at sleep more holistically. What you do during the day, the routines you keep, and even what you consume can also influence sleep, and medication isn't always the most effective answer. It's best to remain active, have a routine sleep schedule, avoid caffeine in the evening, and unwind a couple of hours before bed, among other habits. In addition, focusing on addressing anxiety surrounding insomnia may be more effective and safer than medications or herbal supplements.

Here's to getting a good night of rest!

Alice!

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