

274. *PIPER METHYSTICUM* Forst. (PIPERACEAE) — Kava-Kava

Stimulant consumed with Polynesian religious rites, usually as a fermented liquor made from the upper portion of the rhizome. The natives believe it relaxes the mind and body, eases pain, and induces restful sleep. Kava prepared by chewing and fermenting is said to be narcotic. Unlike alcohol, the drug does not impair mental alertness.¹¹ The deep dreamless sleep following kava ingestion is not followed by hangover.¹¹ Tierra²⁸ speaks not of dreamless sleep, but of “a deep restful sleep with clear, epic-length dreams.” According to Duve,²⁶⁶ the chemical constituents possess anaesthetic, analgesic, anticonvulsive, antifungal, sleep-inducing, and spasmolytic properties. Dihydrokawain and dihydromethysticin are both said to have sedative effects.

Considered anesthetic, anodyne, antiseptic, aphrodisiac, aromatic, diuretic, expectorant, galactagogue, narcotic, sedative, sudorific, and tonic.^{2,11} The cold water extract of the roots is considered stimulant and tonic.¹¹ Used in backache, bronchitis, chills, colds, coughs, debility, elephantiasis, gonorrhoea, headache, leucorrhoea, lungs, myalgia, nocturnal emissions, renitis, rheumatism, skin ailments, tuberculosis, urethritis, vaginitis.^{32,33} The diuretic properties led to its use for bronchial and rheumatic ailments resulting from heart troubles, as well as gout. Homeopathically suggested for headache and neurasthenia.³³ Rose describes it as a lilac-scented douche for vaginitis which “gives a tingling type of sensation to the mucous membranes.”⁴⁷

Contains a greenish-yellow aromatic resin called kawain, and various alkaloids, with an abundance of starch.² The extract dihydromethysticin may cause exfoliative dermatitis. Methysticin, dihydrokawain, and yangonin are also reported.¹¹ Benzoic and cinnamic acids may have a local anesthetic action.⁵ Also, contains yangonin, 11-methoxyyangonin, demethoxyyangonin, methysticin, dihydromethysticin, kawain, dihydrokawain, 5-dihydroyangonin, and tetrahydroyangonin.²⁶⁶

Toxicity — Continued usage may cause inflammation of the body and eyes, resulting in ugly ulcers, parching, and peeling of the skin.² According to the FDA kava resin acts upon the spinal column.⁶² Tierra suggests that “regular use of large doses will cause an accumulation of toxic substances in the liver.”²⁸