HEALTH BASICS

Valerian

Valerian is an herbal supplement made mainly from the root of the valerian plant.

WHAT IT IS
An herbal supplement made mainly from valerian root

WHERE IT COMES UP
Sleep aids, calming products, teas, and supplement labels

WHY IT MATTERS
It may cause drowsiness and interact with sedating substances

WHAT IT IS NOT
Not a disease or diagnosis

WHO TO ASK
A pharmacist or primary care clinician

HOW IT IS CHECKED
No clinical test; product quality testing may help

Overview

Valerian is an herb. Supplements usually come from the roots and underground stems of Valeriana officinalis . It is sold as capsules, tablets, liquid extracts, and teas. It may also be combined with herbs such as hops, lemon balm, or passionflower.

People commonly use valerian for sleep problems, stress, or anxiety. Research has not shown a clear, reliable benefit for these uses. Studies have tested different products and amounts, making their results difficult to compare. Some people report sleeping better, while others notice no effect.

Valerian is not a disease or diagnosis. It is also not an approved treatment for insomnia in the United States. An American Academy of Sleep Medicine guideline suggests not using valerian for chronic insomnia because the evidence does not show a dependable benefit.

Herbal supplements are regulated differently from medicines. The amount and form of valerian can differ between products, and the label may not fully predict what is in the container.

How it works

Researchers do not fully understand how valerian might affect the body. Laboratory studies suggest that some of its chemicals may influence gamma-aminobutyric acid, usually called GABA. GABA is a chemical messenger that helps reduce activity in parts of the brain.

This possible effect is sometimes used to explain why valerian may cause relaxation or drowsiness. However, laboratory findings do not prove that a supplement improves sleep or anxiety in everyday use.

Valerian products are not interchangeable. Tea, powdered root, and concentrated extracts contain different mixtures of plant chemicals. Growing conditions, storage, processing, and combinations with other ingredients can also change a product's effects.

There is no blood test that shows whether you need valerian or predicts whether it will work for you.

Why it matters for your health

The main health issue is sedation, meaning reduced alertness or increased sleepiness. This may affect driving, operating machinery, working at heights, or any activity that requires quick reactions. Effects may be stronger when valerian is taken with alcohol or another sedating substance.

Medicines that can add to drowsiness include prescription sleep medicines, benzodiazepines like diazepam or lorazepam , opioids like oxycodone or morphine , some antihistamines like cetirizine or loratadine , and other medicines that slow brain activity. Anesthesia and medicines used during procedures are also relevant. Tell the surgical or anesthesia team about valerian and any other supplements you use.

Reported unwanted effects include headache, dizziness, stomach upset, mental dullness, and unusually vivid dreams. Some people may instead feel restless or have more difficulty sleeping. Information about long-term, regular use remains limited.

There is also limited safety information for pregnancy, breastfeeding, and children. This does not prove that valerian is harmful in these situations, but it means risks have not been clearly defined.

Product quality matters. Independent quality testing may help confirm that a product contains the listed ingredients and does not exceed certain contaminant limits. A quality seal does not prove that valerian is effective or suitable for you.

What can go wrong

Valerian is often used in situations involving insomnia or anxiety. These conditions can have causes that need separate attention. Ongoing sleep trouble may relate to sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, depression, medication effects, pain, an irregular sleep schedule, or another health concern. Taking a supplement without reviewing the problem may delay a useful assessment.

Combining valerian with alcohol, cannabis, sedating medicines, or other calming supplements can increase sleepiness and impaired coordination. Accidental injury becomes more likely if you drive or do hazardous work while impaired.

Allergic reactions are possible with any plant product. Stop using it and seek emergency help for difficulty breathing, swelling of the face or throat, fainting, or an inability to wake normally.

Rare reports have linked valerian-containing products with liver injury. In some cases, the product contained several herbs, so valerian's role was uncertain. Stop taking the product and seek prompt medical care if you develop yellow skin or eyes, dark urine, pale stools, severe ongoing nausea, or pain in the upper right abdomen.

Taking much more than the label directs, or accidental swallowing by a child, needs prompt advice from a poison control service. Call emergency services if the person has severe confusion, breathing difficulty, collapses, has a seizure, or cannot be awakened.

These urgent situations are different from routine follow-up. Mild side effects, a lack of benefit, or sleep problems that continue can usually be discussed through a regular appointment or with a pharmacist.

What you can do

Before buying or using valerian, read the entire label. Check whether it contains valerian alone or a mixture of ingredients. Combination products may have different effects and interactions.

Practical steps include:

Do not combine valerian with alcohol or sedating medicines without first checking with a pharmacist or clinician. If you are pregnant, breastfeeding, considering it for a child, or living with liver disease, ask a clinician before using it because safety information is limited.

If you are trying valerian for sleep, a sleep diary can provide more useful information than memory alone. Record when you go to bed, how long you think it takes to fall asleep, nighttime waking, wake time, daytime sleepiness, and supplement use.

Arrange routine follow-up if sleep trouble continues, interferes with daytime life, or comes with loud snoring, gasping during sleep, uncomfortable leg sensations, low mood, or major changes

in energy. These details may help identify a condition that valerian would not address.

No routine medical test is needed simply because you use valerian. Testing may be appropriate only when a clinician is assessing a separate concern, such as ongoing sleep problems or possible liver injury.

- Keep a record of the product name, ingredients, amount taken, and timing
- Show the label to a pharmacist when checking for interactions
- Avoid driving or hazardous tasks until you know how it affects you
- Tell healthcare teams about it before surgery, sedation, or a procedure
- Store it securely away from children and pets
- Look for credible independent quality testing when choosing a supplement

Common questions

Is valerian a sleeping pill?

No. It is an herbal supplement marketed for sleep and relaxation. Its ingredients, regulation, and evidence differ from those of approved prescription or nonprescription medicines.

Does valerian reliably improve sleep?

Current research does not show a consistent benefit. Differences between products and studies make firm conclusions difficult. If poor sleep is persistent, an assessment and proven approaches such as cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia may be more useful.

Can I take it every night?

Long-term safety has not been established clearly. Regular use is worth discussing with a pharmacist or primary care clinician, especially if you take other medicines or have an ongoing health condition.

Is valerian tea the same as a capsule?

No. Tea, dried root, and extracts may contain different amounts and mixtures of active plant chemicals. One product's effects cannot be assumed to apply to another.

Does "natural" mean it is safe?

No. Plant products can cause side effects, interact with medicines, and differ in quality. "Natural" describes the source, not the level of risk.

Can valerian be tested in the blood?

There is no standard clinical blood test used to measure valerian use or decide whether it is

appropriate. If a reaction is suspected, clinicians assess the circumstances, symptoms, product label, and any other substances taken.

Sources

- National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health. Valerian: Usefulness and Safety . U.S. National Institutes of Health.
- National Institutes of Health, Office of Dietary Supplements. Valerian: Fact Sheet for Health Professionals .
- Sateia MJ, Buysse DJ, Krystal AD, Neubauer DN, Heald JL. Clinical Practice Guideline for the Pharmacologic Treatment of Chronic Insomnia in Adults . Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine . 2017;13(2):307-349.
- Shinjyo N, Waddell G, Green J. Valerian Root in Treating Sleep Problems and Associated Disorders-A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis . Journal of Evidence-Based Integrative Medicine . 2020;25.
- National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases. Valerian . LiverTox: Clinical and Research Information on Drug-Induced Liver Injury . NCBI Bookshelf.
- European Medicines Agency, Committee on Herbal Medicinal Products. European Union Herbal Monograph on Valeriana officinalis L., Radix .