

Valerian

Valeriana officinalis

People use valerian root tea to relieve restlessness and nervous disturbance of sleep.⁸²

Effectiveness:

Two brief clinical trials demonstrated improvements in sleep without side effects.^{108,109} While valerian can promote sleep and decrease latency to sleep, it does not appear to reduce night awakenings.^{110,111}

Action:

Valerian contains volatile compounds including valepotriates, which are triesters of the bicyclic iridoid monoterpene epoxide nucleus with acetic acid and/or isovaleric acid. Though preparations of valerian root are often standardized for valepotriate content, it is not known whether these compounds are responsible for the pharmacologic activity of valerian.

Due to its mild sedative/hypnotic properties, valerian has been studied for its effects on the inhibitory neurotransmitter, GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), which is the same neurotransmitter affected by the benzodiazepines and barbiturates. Animal research has shown that aqueous extracts of valerian root do, in fact, increase the levels of GABA in the synapse by blocking a carrier protein-dependent re-uptake of the neurotransmitter. Thus, in some respect, valerian root may be thought of as a re-uptake inhibitor of GABA, somewhat analogous to serotonin re-uptake inhibition by the SSRIs.

Adverse Effects:

One case report of valerian overdose describes fatigue, abdominal cramping, mydriasis and tremor in a patient who ingested about 20 times the recommended dose.¹¹² Chronic users can experience headache, excitability, uneasiness and cardiac disturbances.¹¹² There are also reports of anticholinergic toxicity and hepatotoxicity from multi-herb products containing valerian.^{112,113}

Interactions:

No drug interactions with valerian are known. But people who use valerian might be wise to avoid taking benzodiazepines and other sedative/hypnotic agents.

Quiz Questions...

27

A nurse practitioner calls you at the pharmacy to ask if there are any good herbal products she might recommend to a patient of hers who is having difficulty with sleep. Valerian pops into your mind, but which of the following statements should you make regarding this herb?

- The evidence for valerian's sedative properties are strictly hearsay.
- This is a dangerous drug.
- Be careful of psychological or physical dependence developing to valerian.
- Valerian may help the patient fall asleep sooner, but may not help reduce night awakenings.

300 - 600 mg

(or 2-3 gm
of root
extract)