

# Valerian

the not just for

# Sleep Herb



If you thought valerian was only for better sleep or insomnia, you're shortchanging yourself. While valerian is renowned for its ability to help you fall asleep faster, sleep without frequent night time waking, and wake up more refreshed, it has other redeeming qualities.

Ask the leading herbalists to name the most popular and widely used herbs. Valerian would be in the top ten. A calmative herb, valerian eases anxiety, soothes frazzled nerves, and quiets a restless night. Although valerian acts on the central nervous system, its ability to relax smooth muscles also makes it effective for premenstrual syndrome, muscle aches and pains, and "nervous" stomachs. Valerian enhances overall brain function and learning ability in children and adults with attention deficit order (ADD).

Like most herbs, valerian has a long history of use, with records dating back to Hippocrates in fourth century B.C. and Discorides in 41-68. Valerian tincture was listed as an official drug in the U.S. Pharmacopeia from 1820-1936 and in The National Formulary from 1888-1946. Valerian was also taught in the standard U.S. medical textbooks. With the advent of synthetic sedatives in the 1940s, valerian use slowed in this country but not in Europe.

## Anxiety/Stress

If you're under stress, feel anxious, have a nervous stomach or just want to feel a little calmer, valerian may be your herb. It can be safely taken during the day without drowsiness to ease tense nerves and muscles. When you're anxious, the adrenals tell the heart to pump blood harder and faster, the muscles to tense, and you enter the "fight or flight" state. When the stress is over, your body returns to normal, relaxing and resting. If you constantly stay in the state of stress, the adrenal glands work overtime to a point of possible exhaustion. In two random, double blind studies, a valerian and St. John's wort combination was compared to 25 mg of amitriptyline for easing anxiety. The herbal combination fared evenly in one study and superior in the other, notably for less side effects [Kriebel, 1988]. Most experts suggest starting at a half dose once a day and increasing to 2-3 times a day as needed. You can still take your evening dose of valerian for sleep.

## Sleep

About one third of Americans suffer from insomnia on a regular basis and up to 10 million depend on prescriptive medicines to help them fall asleep. In addition to being addictive, some sleeping pills actually interfere with the body's natural sleep cycle. Others have a rebound effect, making it difficult to discontinue their use. Furthermore, you may have to battle the "I can't wake up in the morning" effect prescription sedatives deliver.

Valerian, on the other hand, boasts no addictive quality while providing a good night's sleep without that "hangover" feeling. Valerian is found in more than 80 over-the-counter sleep formulas in the United Kingdom, and over 100 in Germany. Valerian comes from the Latin word *Valere* which means "in good health". Since your body does most of its regeneration and repair during sleep, valerian is appropriately named. Naturopathic Donald Brown, N.D., suggests taking 300-500 mg one hour before bedtime. This restful herb will help you fall asleep, lessen night time awakenings and improve overall sleep quality. In

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## Valerian *continued*

one clinical study of 122 participants, an enhanced sense of well-being was also reported [Vorbach, 1996]. Even those who considered themselves "poor sleepers" reported good results with valerian. A study of 78 elderly people had similar results in as little as two weeks [Karrim, 1984].

### Muscle Pain Relief

Valerian is an antispasmodic and can help muscle spasms in fibromyalgia syndrome (FMS) and myofascial pain syndrome (MPS), conditions in which the muscles are shortened and tightened due in part to magnesium deficiencies. Magnesium replacement, which lengthens and softens muscles, is suggested for FMS/MPS. Valerian can be taken simultaneously with magnesium to enhance therapy and relieve the "too tense" symptoms. Additionally, valerian helps other conditions caused by tense or spastic muscles such as headaches, PMS, menstrual cramps, and restless leg syndrome. The World Health Organization (WHO) also credits valerian as a mild blood pressure lowering herb.

### Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD)

In a German study, valerian root extract was given to 120 children with ADD [Klich, 1975]. Researchers found that 75% of the children showed a marked improvement in learning and behavior while increasing their mental function and clarity. Remarkably, valerian increased the length of time the hyperactive individuals were able to concentrate and improved muscle coordination (reflex), while decreasing muscle agitation and mental anxiety! Compliance was also in valerian's factor with no reported negative side effects. The drug of choice for ADHD is Ritalin. Valerian offers significant advantages.

### Check the Label

It's important to check the label with herbs. Although researchers do not always know which *chemical constituent* of a plant is responsible for its effectiveness, they can pinpoint which part of the plant works best. Extracts of the root of valerian have the most active components, such as the

valepotriates. One of the essential oils, valerenic acid, should also be present in at least a 0.5% content. If you've tried valerian before and did not find it effective, you probably did not have the standardized root extract. Valerian is often combined with other herbs such as lemon balm, passion flower, hops or skullcap due to their natural synergy and enhanced effectiveness. In one German study, the combination of valerian root extract (320 mg) and lemon balm was compared to the prescription medicine halcion in the patient's ability to fall asleep and in the quality of sleep [Dressing, 1992]. The herbal combination worked as good but without the morning grogginess reported from halcion users.

### One Stinky Herb

If you do decide to take valerian, it does have its one drawback. Valerian is one stinky herb. Although the tea may sound warm and inviting before bed, you may have to hold your nose while you drink. Most people find the coated valerian tablets or capsules easier on their nose and taste buds. Look for a standardized form with 150 to 300 mg of the root extract.

### Safety

Valerian has no known toxicity and its safety is without question. According to Rob McCaleb, President of the Herb Research Foundation, one of valerian's advantages is that it is quite safe when compared to prescribed sedatives due to its non-addictive nature and because it is not synergistic with alcohol. The *German Commission E* reports that valerian is safe when taken as directed, and the American Herbal Products Association gives valerian a rating of 1, which indicates a wide (mg) dosage and safety range. Valerian is also on the Food and Drug Administration's "generally recognized as safe" or *GRAS List*. In one suicide attempt, a woman took 20 grams of valerian, 20-40 times the recommended dose and suffered symptoms of nerve tingling, nausea and drowsiness. Within 24 hours, her symptoms were gone and her labs were normal, even a liver test [Wiley 1995]. The safety of using valerian while driving has also been studied [Albrecht, 1995]. Two tablets of a combination of valerian root extract 160 mg and lemon balm leaf extract 80 mg was given to 54 subjects twice daily over the course of

three weeks. Alcohol was introduced after the second week. Subjects were tested on cognition, safe operation of machinery and driving, concentration and attentiveness. Although both groups worsened with alcohol, the statistics for the group on valerian were no different than for those on placebo, again showing valerian's effect as a tonic without reducing mental and motor capacity.

### Precautions

Due to its sedative action, valerian does have precautions. Combining valerian with other sedatives, including alcohol and antihistamines, will increase their effects. Valerian is not recommended if you are on pain medications, muscle relaxants, benzodiazepines (Xanax, Valium, Dalmane) or other sedating prescription drugs. Although the *German Commission E* reports valerian safe for pregnant or lactating women, check with your doctor before using. Note: It is always a wise idea to share any supplements you are taking with your health care team.

### Summary

Valerian, *in good health*, is aptly named. As a treatment for anxiety, muscle tension, ADD, and insomnia, its effectiveness and safety are proven in over 200 scientific studies.

### Resources

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