

Valerian

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Common Uses

Valerian or *Valeriana officinalis* is commonly used for insomnia. Existing studies make it difficult to interpret the results as they are of short duration, use small numbers of patients and utilise different valerian preparations. This is highlighted by a systematic review of nine trials, which found that only three had high methodological quality. These three placebo-controlled trials (one study over 28 days and two studies as single dose) involved 257 patients and demonstrated that valerian had some beneficial effect for the treatment of insomnia, although further evidence is still needed ¹.

Since this review, further studies have been published. One randomised, double-blind, placebo-controlled, crossover study, involving 16 patients, found that there was no statistically significant effects on sleep patterns following single-dose administration of valerian ². After long-term treatment (14 days), sleep efficiency (total sleep time divided by time in bed multiplied by 100) had improved for both the valerian and placebo groups but there was no statistically significant difference between them ². A randomised, double blind trial, involving 75 patients with insomnia, compared valerian with the prescription drug oxazepam. No difference between the two groups was shown, although both had significantly improved sleep quality ³. Furthermore, a double-blind, placebo-controlled study, involving 14 elderly patients with insomnia, compared single doses of temazepam, diphenhydramine and valerian. Valerian was found to be no different to placebo on any measure of psychomotor performance or sedation ⁴.

Herbalists may use valerian to treat other conditions such as anxiety, muscle and joint pain, and symptoms associated with the menopause. However there are no robust clinical trials supporting use for these indications.

A number of preparations are used orally including: capsule, oil, extract, tincture, tea.

Side Effects

The following side effects have been documented: headache, drowsiness (may cause sedation and interfere with judgement for 3 – 4 hours after ingestion). However, a hangover effect the following morning does not appear to occur if valerian is taken at bedtime ⁵. Gastrointestinal symptoms (e.g nausea, upset stomach) may occur and rarely, nervousness and excitability have been reported ^{6,7}.

In one case report it was noted that sudden discontinuation of very high doses taken for long periods of time may have led to withdrawal symptoms such as restlessness, insomnia and cardiac disturbances ⁸. However, a causal link with valerian was not proved.

Drug Interactions⁹

- **Anxiolytics, hypnotics, and any other medication that may cause drowsiness**
Sedation and drowsiness may be increased when taken concurrently with valerian.

Precautions

- Not to be used by women who are pregnant or breastfeeding due to lack of data on safety.
- Do not take immediately before driving or operating heavy machinery because of the risk of drowsiness.
- Not to be taken by those who are hypersensitive to valerian.
- Reduce dose gradually over several weeks before surgery in those who may be dependent. However if the patient is unable to withdraw, one case report suggests that the patient may take valerian until the day of surgery and then withdrawal symptoms treated with benzodiazepines if needed ^{8,9}.

References

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