

Valerian (*Valeriana officinalis*)

Location: Valerian is a perennial plant native to Europe and northern Asia.

Description: It grows four feet tall, and bears pinnate leaves and pink flower heads. Valerian root must be carefully dried at temperatures below 105 degrees F before use. The taste is both sweet and spicy, and somewhat bitter, but the odor is unpleasant. It has been used medicinally at least since the time of Hippocrates (460-377 BC).

Properties: The root is the part of the plant used in herbal medicine.

Uses: Valerian is a tranquilizer and calmative useful for disorders such as restlessness, nervousness, insomnia, hysteria, menstrual problems, headaches, and nervous stomach. It is also good for circulation. Valerian alkaloids have been known to lower blood pressure. Benefits of valerian for specific health conditions include treatment of the following: anxiety, insomnia, menopause-related problems, restless leg syndrome, indigestion, and irritable bowel syndrome.

Doses: Valerian is available in the form of valepotriate tablets and as tinctures. The herb can also be made into tea. In its natural state, valerian contains a compound known to aid sleep from its essential oil. For this reason, valerian preparations used for insomnia usually state their essential oil content. However, if valerian is combined with herbs such as hops and lemon balm (*Melissa*), a different set of chemicals is responsible for the promotion of sleep. In these compounds, the content of essential oil is not important.

Warnings: People who use valerian for several months may experience withdrawal symptoms (agitation, headache, insomnia, and racing heart) if they abruptly stop using the herb. Used by its self, valerian is almost always free of side effects, although it can increase side effects of barbiturates and tranquilizers such as alprazolam (xanax), chlordiazepoxide (Librium), diazepam (Valium), or lorazepam (Ativan). Symptoms of overdose may include paralysis, weakening of the heartbeat, giddiness, light-headedness, blurred vision, restlessness, nausea, and, possibly, liver toxicity. Valerian should not be used with prescription medications such as diazepam (Valium) or amitriptyline (Elavil), or with sedative or antidepressant drugs, before consulting with a physician. You should not continue taking valerian if you experience heart palpitations or nervousness after taking it. This herb should not be given to children under the age of twelve. It should not be taken with alcohol, nor should it be used by pregnant women or nursing mothers. Research indicates that valerian does not impair one's ability to drive a car or operate machinery. However, there does appear to be some impairment of attention for a couple of hours after taking valerian. For this reason, it is not a good idea to drive immediately after taking it.