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Ancient herb known as ‘nature’s Valium’ touted for improving sleep and anxiety

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Valerian, an herbal supplement long used for sleep and relaxation, has been referred to as "nature's Valium" — but experts are divided on whether it truly compares to the prescription sedative.

The herb, which is sold as a dietary supplement in the U.S., is a common ingredient in products marketed as "mild sedatives" and sleep aids, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Valium, the brand name for diazepam, is used to treat anxiety, seizures and muscle spasms by calming the nervous system, Cleveland Clinic notes.

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Valerian supplements are derived from the roots of *Valeriana officinalis*, a flowering plant native to Europe and Asia that has also naturalized in northeastern America, according to the American Botanical Council (ABC).

The plant has a "long history of medicinal use," per the ABC, with the primary goal of reducing anxiety and stress as well as improving sleep quality. It has historically also been used for migraines, fatigue and stomach cramps.

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Dried valerian roots can be prepared as teas or tinctures, while other plant materials and extracts have been distributed as capsules or tablets, per the NIH.

The agency noted, however, that there is a "relatively small amount of research" investigating the herb's impact on various conditions.

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However, Stefan Gafner, PhD, chief science officer of the American Botanical Council in Texas, confirmed that some clinical trials have explored valerian root's effects.

A 2020 medical review published in the Journal of Evidence-Based Integrative Medicine found that both powdered root and root extracts show a "clear" benefit in treating anxiety, Gafner told Fox News Digital.

The researchers concluded that valerian could be a "safe and effective herb to promote sleep and prevent associated disorders."

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While valerian may have some benefits, Gafner said he doesn't think it "makes sense" to compare it to diazepam (Valium).

"I can understand that both are used to relieve anxiety, but valerian is a much milder ingredient, and is really used for mild cases of anxiety and sleep issues," he told Fox News Digital.

Unlike valerian, diazepam carries a risk of dependence and is generally prescribed short-term, the expert said, and the spectrum of potential adverse effects is "very different."

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Gafner said he "absolutely" recommends the use of valerian root to relieve anxiety and stress and to improve sleep.

"I have used it myself and I believe it's an ingredient with well-documented benefits, especially for people with problems falling asleep," he said. "It is well-tolerated and very safe ... although some sources caution [against] driving a car or using heavy machinery when using valerian."

Dr. Joseph Mercola, a board-certified family medicine osteopathic physician and author of the new book "Weight Loss Cure," said valerian's comparisons to Valium may "exaggerate what the science actually shows."

"Valerian root contains compounds that appear to enhance calming brain chemicals, particularly the neurotransmitter GABA, which helps quiet nerve activity and supports relaxation," the Florida-based expert told Fox News Digital.

"Some studies do report modest improvements in sleep quality or shorter time to fall asleep, while others find no meaningful difference compared with placebo."

Side effects may include headaches, dizziness, digestive upset or next-day grogginess, Mercola noted, adding that he would not recommend it as a primary strategy for anxiety, stress or sleep.

"Because long-term safety studies remain limited, and supplement quality varies widely, you should approach valerian with caution rather than view it as a universal sleep solution," he advised.

"I encourage people to focus first on strategies that correct the underlying drivers of poor sleep," Mercola advised. "When you fix those foundations, you often find that you no longer need an herbal sedative at all."

"Bright sunlight during the day helps regulate your circadian rhythm and signals your brain to produce melatonin later at night," he said. "At the same time, complete darkness [at night] supports the hormonal signals that allow deep, restorative sleep."

Certain nutrients can also promote relaxation and sleep quality, including magnesium, which helps to regulate the nervous system, according to the doctor.

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GABA may help to calm nerve activity, reduce stress markers and improve perceived sleep quality, Mercola said, while glycine — taken at about 3 grams an hour before bed — may support relaxation, promote the body's nighttime temperature drop, and improve sleep onset and overall quality.

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"When you combine sunlight exposure, magnesium, GABA and glycine, you support the biological systems that control sleep instead of relying on a sedating herb with mixed evidence," the doctor concluded.

Fox News Digital reached out to valerian root manufacturers requesting comment.

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