



INSOMNIA AND VALERIAN

Insomnia is a common problem which is chronic for some people and intermittent in others. For all, stress aggravates the condition. Therefore, managing stress is the first issue to consider. Regular exercise is very important, and often gets neglected in our American life, and in times of stress. Talking to friends and loved ones, writing in a journal, and counseling are also helpful. A regular bedtime and sleeping habits are also major factors, as is limiting caffeine, and consuming it only more than 12 hours before bedtime.

Once the above issues have been optimized, medications can also be helpful. Valerian is an herb whose hypnotic (sleep inducing) attributes have been known since at least the ninth century. Folklore associates the Pied Piper's abilities with valerian root, and also assigns it an ability "to increase harmony between squabbling husbands and wives". The last two uses have not been scientifically tested,(!) but the effect on insomnia has been, to a degree.

According to the Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database, "Most research shows that taking valerian orally reduces the time to sleep onset (sleep latency), and improves subjective sleep quality." The herb has been studied in groups numbering from 16, in which multiple polysomnograms were performed on each participant, to 391 who were required to read study information and respond to questions via the internet. The longest studies lasted one month. One study each used valerian in combination with hops or lemon balm (potentially beneficial), or kava (no difference from placebo).

The pharmacologically active components in valerian vary both between and within species of the plant. There are also several compounds which have related potency. These factors make it difficult to standardize, that is, to define a repeatable dose. "Valerian extract" seems to be the most common form studied. A dose of 400 to 900 mg taken a half hour to 2 hours before bedtime seems most effective. However, when I checked at a local grocery store, most of the preparations were not standardized, and there was only one extract. Thus, who knows what you're getting. This may not be as bad as it sounds for the casual consumer, since varying preparations may have similar benefit due to other components with related potency (as noted above), but it certainly makes it harder to scientifically study it with respect to interactions with other herbs and drugs.

Doses recommended on various bottles vary widely. This is one herb I would definitely get a reputable brand, not a "house brand" (the label of a chain store). In doing that, I think one would be safe taking the recommended dosing an hour before bedtime. Most sleep medications work much better when used only intermittently, no more than two or three days in a row or in a week, which is why it is important to first follow the recommendations in the first paragraph. Valerian may work better with daily use for two weeks. Its use longer than a month has not been studied. Use valerian cautiously or avoid if you take cholesterol medications in the statin family, oral anti fungal agents, fexofenadine (allegra), prescription sleep medications, many psychiatric medications, or chemotherapeutic agents. Most prescribers and pharmacists can check your specific medication for interactions with herbs.

Some preparations suggest dosing three times daily, presumably for anxiety. This use and dosing has not been sufficiently studied, and would be much more likely to cause side effects such as headache, excitability, uneasiness, cardiac disturbances, liver toxicity and (paradoxically) insomnia. It also affects response time, so one should not drive or operate mechanical equipment within 6 hours of taking a dose. As these compounds are chemically related to benzodiazepines, withdrawal symptoms have been reported when longer term treatment is abruptly discontinued.

Valerian is a pretty flower that grows in moist tundra and boggy meadows around here. It has a distinct fragrance that I find rather unpleasant. Our local species are likely pharmacologically active. As I have never seen more than a couple plants in an area, I would ask that you not harvest them so they can remain in their/our ecosystem. Another species grows in southeast Alaska; I don't know how common it is.

Sources: Natural Medicines Comprehensive Database, Discovering Wild Plants by Janice Schofield.