

Valerian Root

A practical reference for dose, timing, and what the research supports.

What Valerian Root Is

Valeriana officinalis is a flowering herb whose root has been used as a sleep aid since antiquity. Its active constituent, valerenic acid, is thought to increase GABA activity in the brain by inhibiting the enzyme that breaks GABA down. This produces a mild, generalized calming effect rather than a targeted circadian signal like melatonin.

Effective Dose Range

- Standard dose:
300-600mg of standardized valerian root extract, ideally standardized to 0.8% valerenic acid.
- Avoid unstandardized powder:
Potency varies significantly batch to batch when the extract isn't standardized. Check the label for a valerenic acid percentage.
- Form:
Capsules are strongly preferred over tea or raw root — valerian has a strong, unpleasant smell that most people find unpalatable as tea.

Timing

- When to take it:
30-60 minutes before your intended bedtime.
- Build-up period:
Unlike melatonin, valerian's sleep benefit in trials tends to appear after 2-4 weeks of consistent nightly use, not on the first night. Judge it on a 2-3 week trial, not a single dose.
- Consistency matters more than dose size:
A moderate nightly dose taken consistently outperforms occasional higher doses in the available trial data.

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What to Avoid

- Alcohol and sedatives:
Valerian's GABA-potentiating effect can compound with alcohol, benzodiazepines, or other sedating medications. Do not combine.
- Driving or operating machinery:
Some people experience morning grogginess or vivid dreams. Test your individual response on a low-stakes evening first.
- Pregnancy or breastfeeding:
Safety data is limited. Speak with a doctor before use.
- Long-term unsupervised use:
Most trials studied 4-6 week windows. Longer-term safety data is thinner — periodic breaks and physician check-ins are reasonable if using it long-term.

Quality Checklist

- Standardized extract:
Look for '0.8% valerenic acid' or similar on the label, not just 'valerian root powder.'
- Third-party tested:
NSF, USP, or Informed Sport certification indicates independent verification of contents.
- No proprietary blends:
The valerian dose should be individually listed in milligrams, not hidden inside an unlabeled blend.
- Realistic claims:
Be skeptical of products promising immediate, dramatic sedation — that's inconsistent with valerian's actual mechanism and trial data.

How It Compares to Melatonin

Melatonin signals circadian timing and is most useful for shifting when you feel sleepy — jet lag, shift work, delayed sleep phase. Valerian does not affect the circadian clock; it works through generalized GABA-mediated calming instead. The two target different problems and are commonly used together rather than as substitutes for one another.