

UPDATE: National kratom advocacy group responds to Alton's recent ban

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March 30 2018 2:39 PM



ALTON – In the wake of yesterday's story regarding the recent ban of kratom in Alton, Riverbender.com has been inundated with emails, comments and calls regarding the benefits of kratom, which were not included in yesterday's article.

Kratom United, an advocacy group dedicated to the legalization and regulation of kratom said they were the main force behind keeping kratom from being scheduled by the United States Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and were able to reinstate its usage and sale in Tennessee as well as maintaining its legal status in Kentucky, where the

organization is based. An administrator of that organization sent Riverbender.com an independent research analysis conducted by Pinney Associates, consulting firm dedicated to abuse-deterrent drug formulation evaluation, drug abuse potential assessment, pharmaceutical risk management, prescription to over-the-counter switches, over-the-counter product stewardship and tobacco harm reduction.

The study was conducted to set the scheduling recommendation under United States federal law for kratom. It looked at the abuse potential, addiction potential and overall harm inflicted by kratom.

According to the study, the active chemical compound in kratom, mitragynine, is addictive when given in massive amounts to animals. While many say the chemical compound causes effects similar to opioids, the study does not consider kratom an opioid. It also stated the abuse potential of kratom and its alkaloids, which mimic opioids in high doses, is “substantially lower than that of morphine and other opioids, and differ in other ways as well, such as physiologic manifestations. In fact, the study said different strains of kratom have different effects, including mild caffeine-like stimulant effects in moderate doses.

Kratom, or *mitragyna speciosa*, is a tropical deciduous tree within the coffee family indigenous to Southeast Asia, specifically Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Vietnam, the study said. It has been made illegal in Thailand due to the government claiming it is addictive and damaging to public health, but many people in that area of the world utilize it as a tea or chew on its leaves throughout workdays for energizing and minor pain-relieving effects it brings them, the study stated.

Besides teas and chewing on leaves, many people also make kratom into powder after drying the leaves and creating tinctures to ingest it in a liquid form.

The study said both scientific and ethnographic literature of the area describes kratom users to take the herb because of its “useful, beneficial, labor-sustaining, therapeutic, mood-and-well-being enhancing and instrumental” benefits, as well as some cases of dependence, but the study said such dependence rates in Southeast Asia are not known, but added there are parallels to the consumption of coffee, tea and other caffeinated beverages.

People in the regions also claim to use kratom for mood enhancement, weight control and even headaches. The study states high usage of kratom can create a similar dependence to a high usage of coffee, and caffeine addiction is not considered as disorder by the American Psychiatric Association, despite having many of the similar effects to other chemical dependencies.

Because of the light risk of dependence with kratom use as well as only three or four publicly-documented deaths, despite two decades of increasing consumption of the herb by millions of Americans, the study advised against placing it as a controlled substance under federal scheduling – a ruling to which the United States Federal Government agreed.

However, there are nearly 10,000 vendors of kratom in the United States, and many of those are not regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, which heavily warns against the use of kratom. Because of this lack of regulation, even administrators of Kratom United advise against purchasing kratom from gas stations or other retailers not informed about their products and possible interactions.

“These kids I read about getting sick in Alton, do you know what type of kratom they were using?” The administrator asked in response to Alton Police Chief Jake Simmons asserting his stance kratom was a dangerous drug, similar to bath salts, after local children were becoming sick and lethargic because of its use. “Some kratom being sold is not the pure, organic leaf. Some of these vendors mix in research chemicals, and I agree those should be banned.”

Simmons said he is for the kratom ban in Alton, which was decided at the Alton City Council meeting last Wednesday night. He said he advises other municipalities in the area to follow suit and band the possession and sale of kratom as well. Possession or selling kratom in Alton can now result in a fine, and businesses may lose their business license if they violate the ordinance.

The Alton Police Department was dispatched to The Cave on Broadway Thursday afternoon to inform the owners of the new law. Simmons said they were advised to no longer possess or sell kratom within the City of Alton.

Alton Public Information Officer Emily Hejna sent a copy of the FDA's warnings against kratom usage. The conclusion of the study conducted advised the agency take more control over the regulation of kratom in much the same fashion it oversees coffee and tea. The FDA, however, completely recommends consumers against using kratom, saying the substance “appears to have properties that expose users to the risks of addiction, abuse and dependence.”

There are no approved uses for kratom currently under the FDA, which claims the substance may cause liver damage and jaundice in too-high of amounts. A small handful of deaths were also blamed on secondary use of kratom. Those mostly occurred in recovering opiate addicts and were ultimately attributed to encephalitis, or swelling of the brain.

Addiction recovery, in fact, is why many people in the area claim to use kratom, according to the abundance of testimonials sent to Riverbender.com's Facebook comments, messages, emails and calls. Both Simmons and the FDA warn against addicts utilizing kratom to overcome opioid dependency with Simmons saying he would believe medical professionals over anecdotal evidence, but many in recovery are claiming the Alton Police Department and city council made combating their opioid dependency in Alton much harder. Chronic pain patients are saying the same thing.

“I have so many G.I. problems, and after two years of going to doctors, which has ended me up in so much debt, no one could help me with my issues,” one man said in an email to Riverbender.com. “All the chemicals from pills and prescriptions written by the doctors only made me worse, and again put me in more debt, and I had no life – stuck at the house, throwing up and losing 40 pounds. I was close to death, but then I heard of kratom and did my research on it and gave it a try. I was back! Able to communicate and leave the house and no longer was throwing up and not eating and losing weight. I'm not back to 100 percent, but with my health issues I never will be. But, I'm alive, I'm working 40 hours a week and am able to take care of myself and my elderly mother. Without kratom, I will lose my job, be unable to work, I won't be able to take care of my mother, and we'll both end up homeless.”

This individual agreed with Simmons's assessment the substance should not be in the hands of young children who do not understand its effects.

Abuse of kratom, according to www.drugabuse.gov can cause the following adverse side effects:

- Sensitivity to sunburn
- Nausea
- Itching
- Sweating
- Dry Mouth
- Constipation
- Increased urination
- Loss of appetite

The website, which is managed by the National Institute on Drug Abuse said kratom on its own is not fatal, and is not responsible for overdose deaths, unlike many of the opioid drugs kratom users claim to be escaping through kratom use.

Though it is neither illegal in Illinois or federally, many states have moved to ban the substance from being sold or possessed in their borders.

A poll hosted on Riverbender.com had nearly 1,000 voters Friday afternoon with 905 voting against banning kratom in Alton (95.56 percent of the vote) and 30 voting in favor of it (3.17 percent of the vote). The remaining 12 votes (1.27 percent of the votes) answered they honestly either did not care about the ban, or did not have enough information to decide.