

# Kratom: An Emerging Youth Concern



Central East (HHS Region 3)

# PTTC

Prevention Technology Transfer Center Network  
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

“Kratom” refers to a naturally occurring tree (*Mitragyna speciosa*) and the products developed from its leaves<sup>1</sup>. Indigenous to Southeast Asia, kratom has been used in traditional medicine for hundreds of years. Over the past 20 years, kratom use has increased across the globe. These changes present potential risks, including for children and youth. Adult kratom use for opioid craving and withdrawal self-management has also expanded alongside the opioid epidemic.<sup>2</sup> However, there are currently no approved medical uses for kratom in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Negative consequences from use have been reported, which require further study.<sup>4</sup>

## THE EFFECTS OF KRATOM

Kratom can mimic the effects of either stimulants or opioids. This is due to the paradoxical effects of its two primary psychoactive compounds: *mitragynine* and *7-hydroxymitragynine*.<sup>5</sup> These compounds interact with different chemical receptors and parts of the nervous system. In smaller doses (~a few grams of dried leaves), kratom produces stimulant-like effects for up to 90 minutes. In larger doses (~10–25 grams of dried leaves), kratom produces opioid-like effects for up to six hours.<sup>6</sup> Kratom use can potentially lead to dependency. Research is ongoing to identify the impacts of kratom use including short- and long-term effects and lethality.

### POTENTIAL NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES<sup>7,8,9,10</sup>



Kratom products have sometimes been found to be contaminated with bacteria, heavy metals, or other substances, which can significantly increase health risks.<sup>11</sup> In rare cases, and almost exclusively in combination with other drugs or contaminants, fatalities have been reported.<sup>12</sup>

→ Parents and caregivers play a vital role in preventing substance use among children and youth. If they see signs of kratom use, parents and caregivers should talk with their children about risks and healthier alternatives.

## KRATOM COMES IN MANY FORMS<sup>13</sup>



Raw leaves



Capsules



Teas



Tinctures



Powders



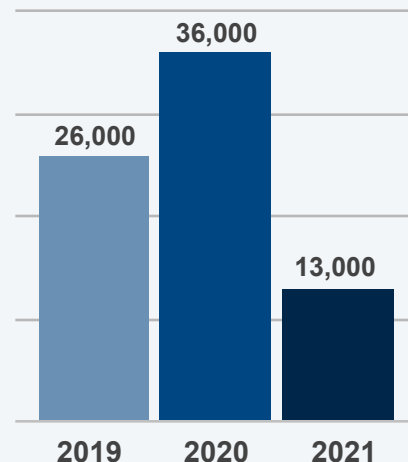
Resins



## ARE YOUTH USING KRATOM?

Comprehensive data on kratom use is not available and limited data is only available since 2019. Research suggests that use in the United States is most common among adults. It is used commonly for social and recreational purposes in the U.S., as well as to self-treat symptoms of chronic pain, depression, and anxiety. Its use among those with substance use disorders has also grown, particularly among those with opioid use disorders. This is potentially for self-management of opioid cravings and withdrawal symptoms, due to the psychoactive effects of kratom, although this is not a medically approved use.<sup>14</sup> Rates of youth use may also be on the rise, with the number of youth who regularly use kratom increasing by an estimated 38% from 2019 to 2020. Youth use may have declined in 2021. However, due to methodological changes in data collection from the COVID-19 pandemic, caution should be used in making any direct comparisons. Youth kratom use appears to be associated with cigarette and cannabis use.<sup>15</sup>

**National Past-Month Kratom Use Among Youth Ages 12-17<sup>17</sup>**

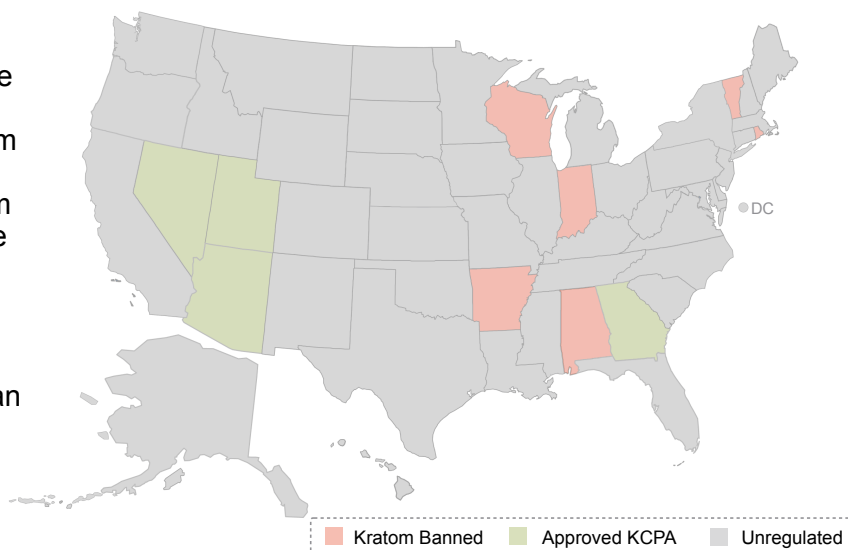


Use rates are estimated to be highest among males, American Indians and Alaska Natives, Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders, those with lower socioeconomic status, and residents of rural and small metro counties. Use rates are also higher among those using illicit substances.<sup>16</sup>

## THE LEGALITY OF KRATOM

Kratom is currently unregulated by the federal government. In 2016, the Drug Enforcement Administration proposed classifying kratom as a Schedule I substance—which would have rendered it illegal under federal law—but the proposal was not finalized. The Food and Drug Administration has not approved kratom for any medical uses and warns consumers against its use.<sup>18</sup> However, kratom is freely available for purchase in most states at numerous types of retailers— as well as online— including by youth. Although this legality is not a guarantee of kratom’s safety.

Six states (AL, AR, IN, RI, VT, and WI) have banned kratom, whereas four states (AZ, GA, NV, and UT) have approved the Kratom Consumer Protection Act (KCPA)—a regulatory framework created by the kratom industry.<sup>19</sup> The KCPA sets standards for the production, distribution, and sale of kratom to prevent product contamination and prohibits the sale of kratom to those under age 18. Depending on state law, local governments may also have authority to ban or regulate kratom. Notable localities that have banned kratom include the cities of Denver (for human consumption only) and San Diego.<sup>20</sup>



## LEGAL STATUS IN THE CENTRAL EAST

- Currently legal and generally unregulated by the region’s six jurisdictions (DE, MD, PA, VA, WV, and DC)
- Industry advocates are lobbying states to approve the KCPA
- State legislators continue to debate banning kratom

## WHAT CAN PREVENTION DO?

Research on kratom is still in the early stages. Major research surveys are only beginning to measure kratom use, and the true scope of prevalence among youth and adults is still unclear. There are also not yet any evidence-based programs designed specifically to address kratom use. But prevention professionals can:

- 1** Implement awareness campaigns
- 2** Advocate for policy changes to regulate or restrict access to kratom
- 3** Deploy broad strategies to improve protective factors against substance use
- 4** Expand epidemiological surveillance to include kratom use and effects

## NOTES

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