

THE DEVIL YOU DON'T KNOW

Deadly drug epidemic fails to break out months after DEA postpones banning obscure herbal painkiller

Last year, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency tried adding an obscure herbal leaf with narcotic effects called kratom to its list of banned substances. Public outcry in support of the mysterious painkiller, as well as a September 2016 letter penned by a small handful of U.S. senators — including Oregon's Ron Wyden — convinced the DEA to back down for the time being.

Several months and a new administration later, kratom waits in uncomfortable limbo, and users wonder if and when the feds might decide to crack down on the mostly harmless Southeast Asian botanical.

"I don't know what I'd do without it," says American Kratom Association (AKA) director Susan Ash.

About five years ago, Ash moved cross-country from Portland to live with her parents in Norfolk, Virginia, after a yet-to-be diagnosed case of Lyme disease began making her life impossible.

The pain was sometimes like lightning, Ash says. It attacked her joints and left her paralyzed for hours on end. For years, her life consisted entirely of hospital visits and bed rest.

"I lost all control of my life," she adds.

Doctors prescribed Suboxone, a synthetic opiate that many drug treatment clinics use to wean junkies off heroin. And before long, Ash was hooked on the highly addictive, doctor-recommended, FDA approved pharmaceutical — which until recently was manufactured exclusively by the good people at Reckitt Benckiser.

A fellow Lyme disease sufferer recommended Ash give kratom a whirl.

"I'd never heard of it," Ash says. She thought: Why not?

Kratom changed everything, she says; her pain steadily subsided, and Ash was able to kick her Suboxone addiction without much trouble.

Ash launched the AKA in 2014 to spread awareness, encourage kratom research and protect users from having to resort to harmful opioid painkillers.

Months ago, when the feds came close to outlawing kratom, *EW* purchased several packets of the stuff from a downtown head shop and supplied this reporter with the recommended dosage.

It tastes like a mouthful of mildew and sawdust. And unless you're in an awful lot of pain, it will probably leave you feeling pretty much the same as usual.

Kratom comes in three main varieties: some of which are said to relax users; others produce an effect similar to drinking a strong cup of coffee; the third type blends stimulant properties and pain relief.

EW foisted the energizing variety on me. But even after upping my intake well beyond the recommended daily amount, I still

couldn't get a good buzz going.

The only difference coworkers noticed was that I visited their workstations more often than usual to ask, "Do I seem okay to you?" Aside from that and few other minor quirks, my behavior seemed completely normal to them.

The conclusion I came to is that there can't be much of a recreational market for kratom because it tastes like filth and isn't any fun.

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"That's precisely our point," Ash says, indicating that most people who rely on kratom for pain relief are between 40 and 60 years old. And many of the them have been feeling skittish ever since the DEA announced plans to classify it alongside heroin and cocaine as a Schedule I banned substance.

Not everyone agrees that it's harmless. Already banned in six states, some argue that kratom is linked to as many as 15 deaths over the last two years. To determine whether Oregon should join the prohibition, state legislators are considering a bill proposed Jan. 9 that would direct the State Board of Pharmacy to study the heretofore unknown hazards of kratom.

The AKA looked into all alleged kratom fatalities cited by the DEA and discovered that all cases involved other substances as well. To date, there are no known deaths attributed conclusively to kratom, Ash says.

The AKA favors more research and some government regulation, but "people shouldn't need a prescription to get their hands on kratom," Ash says.

To help nudge things in the right direction, the AKA recently circulated a petition asking the White House not to ban kratom. In three months, they gathered more than 26,000 signatures, which they then sent to President Trump, who has yet to respond. Presumably he has bigger fish to fry than taking measures to clamp down on a fringy herbal pain medicine that most Americans have never heard of.

Last October, Ash moved back to Portland, where she lives completely independently — an accomplishment she calls the "victory lap" to her long recovery.

Any hope that the newly elected Republican government would pursue a states rights approach to kratom has been somewhat dampened by the new administration's aggressive posturing against legalized recreational cannabis, she says. "We really don't know what's in store."

If the government decides to ban kratom, Ash and other chronic pain sufferers would have to resort to authorized painkillers, however dangerous. "And that's not fair to us." ■

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