

Kratom use prompts concerns in Grand Ronde

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

Kratom is like the plant it is derived from in Southeast Asia: the drug seems to be springing up everywhere, from small corner stores to specialty shops and online retailers.

Depending on the amount ingested, effects can range from that of a stimulant no stronger than coffee to one as potent as an opioid.

Proponents say kratom, marketed in the United States as a supplement, can help with withdrawal from opiates, anxiety, insomnia, low energy and a host of other health conditions.

However, those in addiction medicine are concerned about teen use and the potential for the drug to be used in conjunction with other medicines, with potentially fatal consequences.

Who can buy it and from where varies by state, county and even city. Kratom is considered a supplement and is not regulated by the federal government. Therefore, states and individual cities are left to make their own regulations. It is sold in forms ranging from liquid extracts to chocolate.

In Grand Ronde, Sunstone Organics kratom products are for sale at American Market, a corner store at the intersection of Highway 18 and Grand Ronde Road.

Store Owner Rupal Patel said the location has been offering kratom for two years due to customer demand.

"Our customers were telling us it is sold all over and wanted to be able to buy it here," she said.

The most popular kratom products at the Grand Ronde store are those containing what is known as "white vein" and "red vein." The red leaves are said to produce calming effects while the white leaves act as a stimulant.

Patel said kratom only accounts for a small percentage of the store's overall sales, with seven or eight transactions per day. Most of the customers are older than 30, she added.

Currently, the drug is legal in all states except Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Tennessee, Vermont and Wisconsin, although some individual cities and counties across the country have instituted stricter regulations or banned the substance completely.

In Oregon, kratom is sold as a dietary supplement and is legal for anyone to purchase, no matter their age. Earlier this year, Oregon lawmakers were considering a bill that would have regulated the production, testing and labeling of kratom and limited sales to customers 21 years of age and older. However, the bill didn't make it out of committee. Lawmakers have said they ran out of time and are hoping to address kratom in the next legislative session.



Photo by Timothy J. Gonzalez

A Kratom-for-sale sign stands outside of the American Market on Grand Ronde Road.

Although restrictions on kratom are currently left to individual states and cities, The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is warning consumers not to use it.

The FDA is concerned that kratom, which it says affects the same opioid brain receptors as morphine, appears to leave users at risk of addiction, abuse and dependence. There are currently no FDA-approved uses for the drug and the agency continues to receive "concerning reports" about its safety, according to its website.

Grand Ronde Tribal Chemical Dependency Counselor Joe Martineau said he has seen more and more people seeking treatment for kratom addiction.

"It does have positives and negatives, but it is highly addictive," he said. "People in treatment programs for other drugs have become dependent on it. Just like any addictive drug, the more often you take it, the more you need. Some started using it to help for withdrawal from opiates, then became addicted to both. Unlike a medicated detox, there is no professional intervention or regulated plan."

The American Kratom Association, founded in 2014, states that more than 5 million Americans utilize kratom as a nutritional supplement and that it is a "safe, natural supplement more akin to coffee and tea than any other substances."

Martineau said he thinks otherwise based on his experience with kratom-addicted clients.

"It is just as addictive as any mood altering substance," he said. "The teens especially are thinking of it just like any supplement. The impression they have is that since it isn't illegal, it must be OK. Even if they couldn't buy it here, they could just get it online."

At least 12 people in recovery programs have talked to Martineau about the drug and how potent it is.

"That is my main concern," he said. "It is also very easy to find and is amazing to me how much we don't know that is out there and un-

regulated. And when it comes into a community like Grand Ronde, most don't know what it is or what it does. Using kratom to withdraw from opiates is like downing a bottle of NyQuil to get off booze."

Grand Ronde Tribal Police Chief Jake McKnight said his officers haven't fielded many calls about kratom.

"We believe a youth overdosed on kratom, but we haven't had a ton of issues overall," he said. "The real scary part of it is that it is imported from another country and not regulated, so who knows what is added to it?"

According to recent laboratory testing results released in April by the FDA in which 30 different kratom products from a variety of sources were examined, significant levels of lead and nickel were detected.

"Based on reported kratom usage patterns, heavy kratom users may be exposed to levels of lead and nickel many times greater than the safe daily exposure. ... Based on these test results, the typical long-term kratom user could potentially develop heavy metal poisoning, which could include nervous system or kidney damage, anemia, high blood pressure, and/or increased risk of certain cancers," the report stated.

The American Kratom Association said it supports "appropriate" FDA regulations to ensure the safety of kratom products.

"AKA is committed to work with the FDA to share information and collaborate in the development of regulations that will protect consumers from adulteration and contaminations of kratom products," it states.

Tribal Youth Prevention Manager Nicole Hewitt said that while no local individual cases had been brought to her attention, concern is there.

"There is no age restrictions and it can lead to high risk of problems with prescribed medications that teens might be taking," she said. "We are concerned." ■

The Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon

Tribal Council

2019 CANDIDATES FORUM

Location: Tribal Community Center
Date: Wednesday, July 31, 2019
Time: 6 - 8 p.m.

Come and meet your Tribal Council candidates and hear their views on topics that are important to you!

Tribal members may submit questions for candidates ahead of time by emailing CandidateQuestions@grandronde.org (please include name and roll number).

Dinner provided

For more information, contact Stacia Hernandez at 503-879-2304