

Kava and kratom – substances with ancient roots, but modern risks

By Jenna Solomon

You've likely driven past a business that sells kratom or kava and are curious about them. Kava and kratom are two separate plant-based products with ancient roots, but don't let that fool you. Many of the products available in stores and online are much more potent than the roots and leaves of their original sources.

Kava is a plant native to South Pacific islands. The roots are dried, pulverized and steeped in water to make a tea-like drink. Kava historically and today is used in social and ceremonial gatherings. Kava is a depressant and is described as producing feelings of drunkenness. Kava is often used as an alternative to alcohol, marketed as a "buzz without the booze".

Kratom is tree native to Southeast Asian islands. Historically, people have consumed kratom by chewing on its leaves for a stimulating effect. People often use kratom to self-treat pain, anxiety, depression and opioid withdrawal symptoms. It is marketed as an energy and mood booster.

Kava and kratom are sold as tablets, pills, powders, energy shots and beverages. They are often available at grocery stores, bars, vape shops and kava bars.

Legal questions and health impact

Kava is legal to buy and sell as a dietary supplement in Montana and there are no age restrictions in place. Research on the positive and negative impacts of kava is mixed. Some studies demonstrate effectiveness in treating anxiety, but kava has not been approved as a food additive by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) due to concerns about its negative health impacts. These harmful health effects include mild sleepiness, numb mouth and throat, reduced or loss of appetite and greater risk of liver damage if used with alcohol. Safety concerns have led to restrictions and bans in other countries.

According to the FDA, kratom is not lawfully marketed in the U.S. as a drug product, a dietary supplement or a food additive in conventional food. Some states and municipalities have placed bans or restrictions on kratom, but it is unregulated in Montana after an effort to ban it in the state failed in the 2023 Legislature.

In small doses, kratom produces a stimulant-like effect. However, in large doses it can cause a reaction in our brain similar to opioids, creating a sedative-like effect. Recently, kratom has been reported as a cause of overdose deaths. Narcan, a nasal spray used to reverse some opioid overdoses, has also been found to work on kratom overdoses. People can become addicted to kratom and can also build up a tolerance, like other drugs. Both proponents and opponents to kratom agree that some regulation should be established to ensure the quality of kratom products.

While kava and kratom are two different intoxicating substances, they are often sold together, and both marketed in fruity flavored beverages. More research is needed to understand how these substances

impact human health, but there is concern with the vast availability and promotion of these products without regulation or testing into the quality and contents of these products. With the data currently available, we advise our community to be cautious when considering using kava or kratom, know the risks and discuss with your doctor.

Jenna Solomon is a prevention health specialist at RiverStone Health. She can be reached at 406-651-6403.