

PREMIUM

🏠 > News

America's war against opioid addiction - and the battle for kratom, the dietary supplement that has changed thousands of lives



America's war against opioid addiction - and the battle for kratom, the dietary supplement that has changed thousands of lives CREDIT: AMERICA'S WAR AGAINST OPIOID ADDICTION - AND THE BATTLE FOR KRATOM, THE DIETARY SUPPLEMENT THAT HAS CHANGED THOUSANDS OF LIVES

By **Rachel Ray**

25 JANUARY 2017 • 2:00AM

Death and destruction in the US from the "horrific" and "unprecedented" use of opioids, including heroin, continues to rise.

However, millions of Americans are giving up narcotics for kratom, a plant in the coffee family widely grown in south-east Asia that has been drunk for centuries.

As the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) moves to regulate the increasingly popular botanical remedy, a new kind of war on drugs is under way.

America's opioid epidemic

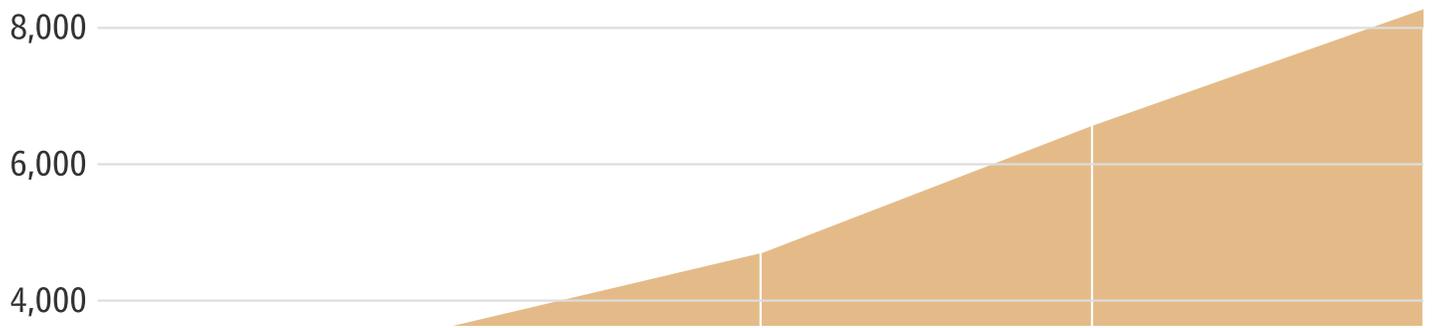
Drug abuser euphoria from opioids in the form of prescription narcotic pain killers came crashing down when US states tightened laws for drugs such as OxyContin.

But many abusers turned with surprising ease from pills to heroin. By September 2015, US authorities estimated there were between 435,000 and 1.5 million heroin users in the US. Treatment centres were flooded with young users.

Heroin-related deaths over time by gender

◆ Female **354%** increase from 2010 to 2014

◆ Male **229%** increase from 2010 to 2014



More than 50,000 Americans died from drug overdoses last year, the most ever. Heroin deaths rose 23 per cent to 12,989, which was higher than the number of gun homicides in America. Deaths from synthetic opioids, including illicit fentanyl, rose 73 per cent to 9,580.

"I don't think we've ever seen anything like this. Certainly not in modern times," Robert Anderson, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told the Associated Press last week.

> THE HEROIN EPIDEMIC <

In-Real-Time

000

00 01 40

The counter below uses data to visualize the number of emergency room visits and lives lost due to heroin in real time.
Use the buttons below to view statistics for different time intervals.

U.S. ER Visits

0.82

Top Metropolitan Areas

Boston 0.04
Denver 0.006
Detroit 0.02
Minneapolis 0.01
NYC 0.04
San Francisco 0.002
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue 0.02
Phoenix 0.01

U.S. Deaths

0.03

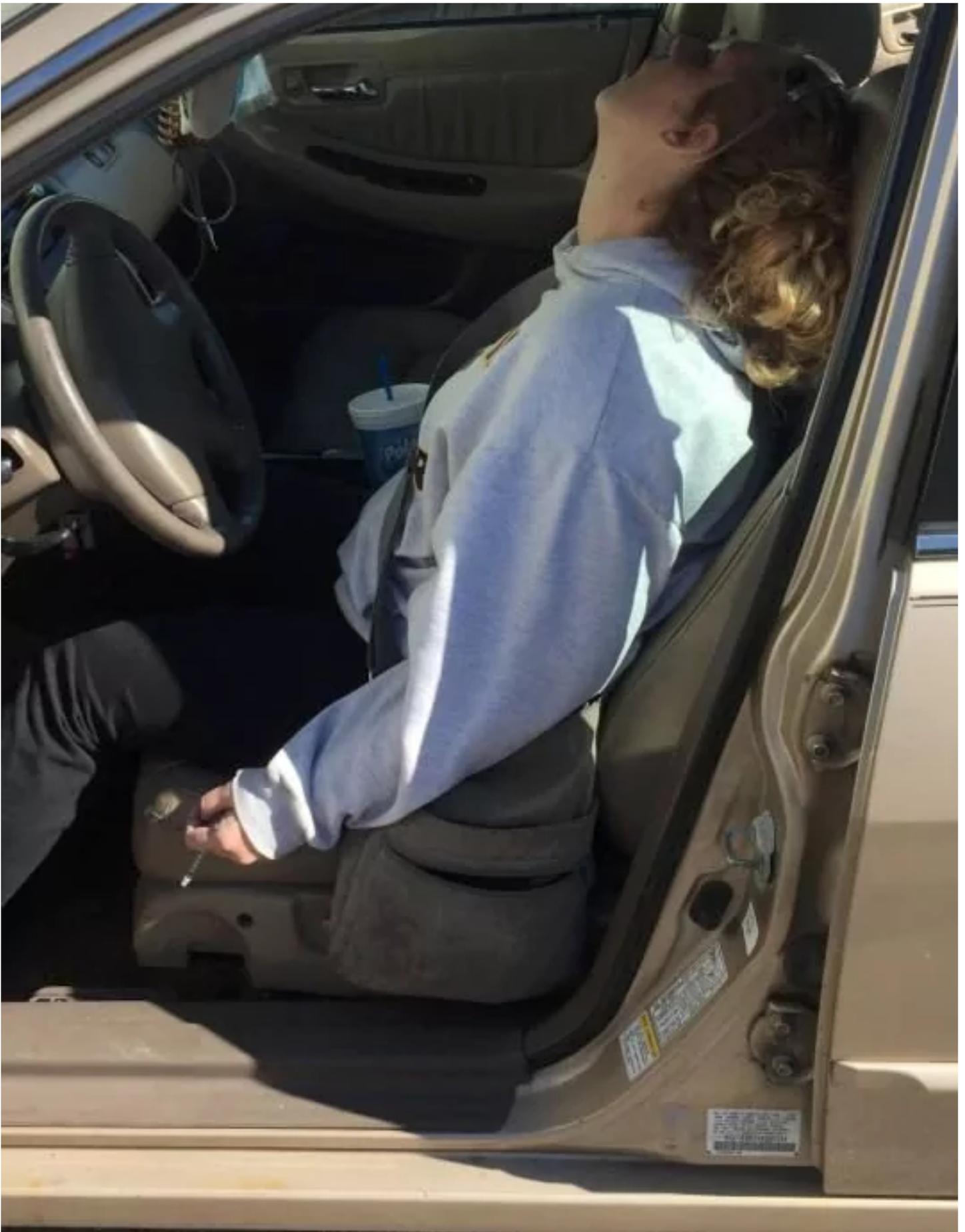
By Gender and Age

Female 0.008
Male 0.03
15-24 0.004
25-34 0.01
35-44 0.008
45-54 0.006
55-64 0.003
65-74 0.000

No longer confined to American's inner big cities, heroin addiction has hit towns and suburbs. In Dayton, Ohio, the coroner reportedly did not have enough room in the county morgue last year for all the corpses resulting from heroin overdose deaths.

There have been two recent cases of parents found in their cars having overdosed from opioids. The photographs were released by police in Ohio and Indiana to highlight the scale of the problem.





Erika Hurt sits with her baby in the back seat of the car in Hope, Ind. Police said she appeared unresponsive from an overdose and had a syringe in her hand CREDIT: TOWN OF HOPE POLICE DEPARTMENT VIA AP

The fight for kratom in the war against the opioid epidemic

Millions of Americans with chronic pain and addiction problems, desperate to break the opioid cycle, are regularly consuming kratom, a plant in the coffee family, as a tea or by dosage in powdered form.

Anecdotal evidence from kratom users submitted as part of petitions to the White House and the US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) describe relief from ailments that run the gamut from heroin addiction and alcoholism to chronic pain from spine injuries, Lyme disease, Multiple Sclerosis, severe depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



Susan Ash speaking at the protest of the DEA scheduling alert in DC in September

For several years, the FDA has imposed an import alert on kratom. That alert relied on the claim that there had been sixteen kratom-associated deaths over the past six years.

Nine of those deaths were from krypton, a street drug in Sweden that contained a small amount of kratom. Several other deaths occurred in the EU from another street drug with high levels of the narcotic pain killer Tramadol and an insignificant amount of kratom. The deaths were found to be caused by the ingestion of Tramadol.

All the deaths that the FDA was relying on for evidence were from developed street drugs that had high levels of narcotics and were spiked with kratom. At the time of FDA's alert, the DEA has also published a Drug Advisory on kratom.

Kratom: Healing Herb or Dangerous Drug?



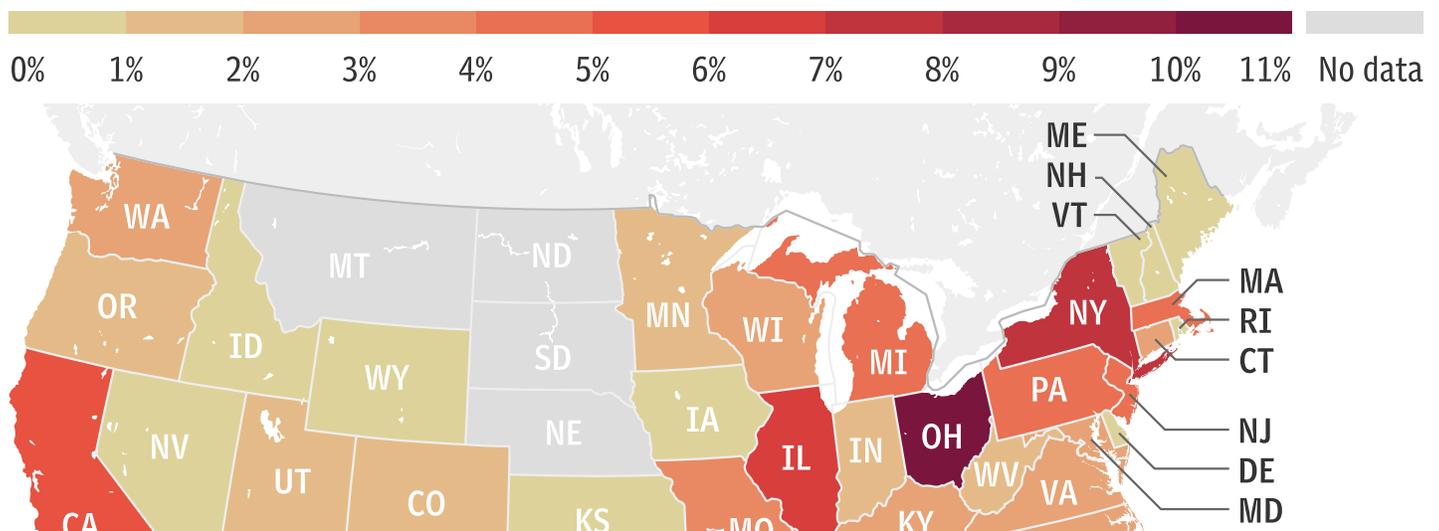
The American Kratom Association maintains that this Drug Advisory and the Import Alert are prima-facie evidence of a long-standing bias against botanical dietary supplements in general, and kratom specifically.

The clash between kratom users and the US government came to a head when dietary supplement companies applied to the FDA to have kratom designated as an Old Dietary Ingredient (ODI) which would allow suppliers to sell it unhindered.

By law, the FDA must reply to those applications with a prescribed analysis supporting its decision.

But seemingly to stop the application process from going forward, the FDA convinced the DEA to issue an emergency scheduling alert, an action that is taken when dangerous drugs have hit the streets, deaths have occurred and the public's safety is at risk.

Percentage of annual heroin-related deaths, by state



The DEA's scheduling action placed kratom in the same dangerous drug category as LSD and heroin. To legally justify the emergency alert, the DEA had to show that kratom was a danger to the American public.

The DEA relied on one report of death to demonstrate a causal link to kratom, in which the deceased's family had said he was "addicted" to the plant.

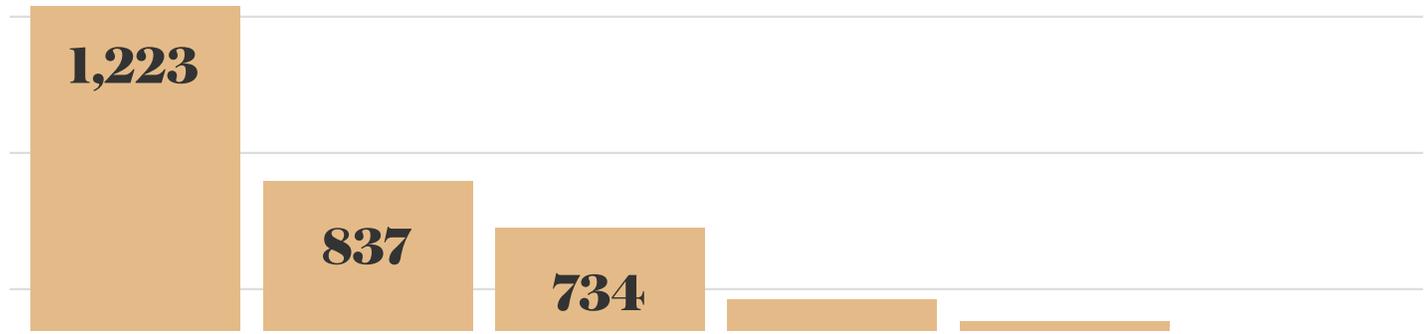
The deceased male suffered from PTSD but when an autopsy was performed, in addition to kratom, there were two other prescription drugs at toxic dosages in his system.

The pushback from the public and the US Congress was unprecedented. With more than 140,000 users signing a petition on the White House's We The People site asking the alert to be withdrawn.

Fifty-one Congressmen and thirteen US Senators signed a letter telling the DEA it had violated and abused its congressionally granted authority to issue a scheduling alert.

Six scientists told the DEA that kratom is not an addictive substance and that regulatory action is completely unjustified given the plant's safety profile.

Annual heroin-related deaths, top states



In September, for the first time in US history, the DEA was forced to withdraw a drug alert. It was the agency's first foray into trying to schedule a botanical herb.

The DEA then opened a public comment period in the Federal Register, the daily journal of the US government, so that Americans could express their views on kratom and ultimately influence the agency's decisions.

That period closed on December 1 with more than 10,000 comments. Now, the DEA must respond to the comments, which could take months, before any more decisions are made about kratom's fate in US commerce.

In the face of conclusive testing that kratom tea is neither addictive nor unsafe for public consumption, the new Trump Administration faces an early challenge related to America's unprecedented opioid crisis. Does it uphold a seemingly long-standing bias by the US's powerful Food and Drug Administration against herbal remedies. Or does it let millions of Americans already using kratom treat chronic pain and opioid addiction with a natural remedy sold freely in the US.

What is Kratom?

Kratom in its natural form is a botanical dietary supplement and part of America's seven billion dollar dietary supplement industry.

The leaves of the kratom plant, grown abundantly in tropical south east Asia, are steeped into a tea or dried into powder form and taken in a dosage. In the US, word about kratom's effects are spread through online chronic pain forums and chat rooms.

Some users initially express skepticism – describing kratom advocates as “nuts” or simply believing claims too good to be true until they actually try the natural remedy.

For many users, the goal is to break a cycle of addiction or at least dependence on increasing dosages of opioid medications for chronic pain.

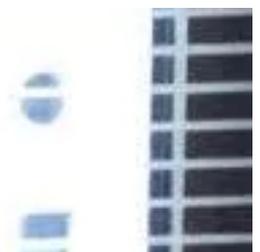
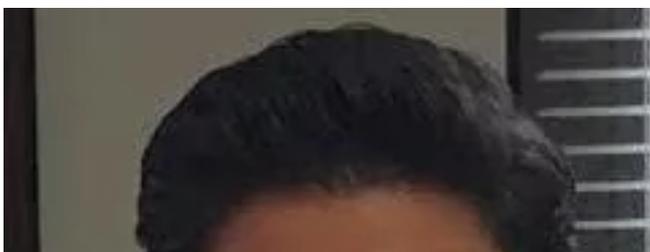
Kratom consumption has been reported to increase energy and a sense of wellbeing. Kratom does not produce a feeling of euphoria as pharmaceutical opioids do and users do not report withdrawal symptoms.

But users attempting to get a “high” by consuming the plant in large amounts have reported queasiness, nausea, and vomiting. Two of the alkaloids contained in the kratom plant act on the same receptors in the brain that opioids do.

At least four patents have been applied for to develop drugs from these alkaloids by three American universities and the pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline.

Kratom users: case studies

Susan Ash is Founder and Director of the American Kratom Association, whose goal is to keep kratom available to American users as tea or pure powder.







Susan Ash lobbying NY State Senator George Amedore when a bill was in play to ban Kratom in NY

After three years of misdiagnosis in which she was described by doctors as “a head case” who “needed a shrink”, she was finally tested for and diagnosed with Lyme disease in 2010. She describes her symptoms thus:

I was having excruciating pain to the point that I was waking up with my joints paralysed. The pain was so bad I could not move my arms or legs. I could not walk. I had to move in with my parents so they could take care of me. They put a bell next to my bed so that when I woke up I would ring the bell with my arm straight out as loud as I could. My parents would come to my room and massage my joints so that I could move my arms and legs enough to get up and go to the bathroom. The joint pain was so severe that in the morning when I put my feet on the floor, it felt like I had been struck by lightning. The paralysis part was really terrifying and these doctors kept telling me it was fibromyalgia. Fybromalgia doesn't cause paralysis and I knew there was something missing. I was winding up in the emergency room in horrible pain about once a month. It was mostly in my joints and that's where it will always stay and that's why I'm taking kratom today.

But prior to finding kratom, Ms Ash was an opioid addict, crushing her powerfully addictive Opana tablets up and snorting them for faster euphoria. Ash said that she became desperate to get away from opioids when she realised she had “absolutely no control” over the number of tablets she might take.

A lack of control that could lead to death if her breathing stopped. Respiratory depression and distress are a common side effect of opioid use.

In late 2013, Ms Ash decided that she was done with narcotics. She started using kratom and experiences none of the cold sweats, shaking, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea from opioid withdrawal. Currently living in Portland, Oregon, Ms Ash has been on disability allowance since 2012.

She is ready to give up her government cheque now based on one condition: that kratom in its natural form is kept available to Americans. Ms Ash takes kratom in capsule form two to three times a day, buying it in bulk and never paying more than \$60 a month.

Andrew Turner, forty-three years old, is a disabled veteran who lives in the Washington, DC area. After serving in the US Navy from 2003 to 2012, he was released for combat injuries received during tours that included Iraq. Mr Turner was then posted as a Task Force Platinum guard at Guantanamo where his hand was crushed by “a particularly combative detainee”.





Andrew Turner

He currently suffers from degenerative disc disease, a non-functioning right hand, cluster headaches, PTSD and Meige's Syndrome, a movement disorder that causes tics and spasms in his face. He has chronic daily pain.

From 2010, Mr Turner was taking six to eight prescribed pills a day. He stated he was never addicted to his opioid medications. However, because of the over-medication, "all sense of quality of life" had been taken away from him, he explained.

The medications for pain and their side effects were compounding his anxiety and panic attacks. Those attacks, in turn, exacerbated Turner's Meige's Syndrome, necessitating hospital emergency room visits. He was desperate for another form of treatment.

In 2014, he began using kratom in tea form and his doctor at the Veterans' hospital in Washington agreed to monitor the condition of his health on kratom.

Mr Turner's initial reaction to information about kratom online was that "it was too good to be true". Two years later, he views the plant as a tool that enables him to be a functional member of society.

For the past twenty-two months, he has been off all prescribed pain medications. Mr Turner drinks a cup of kratom tea in the morning when his pain symptoms are strongest. Every month he has a four-day abstinence or cleanse from the plant.





Andrew Turner

The soldier's life seems to be back on track. He ran for a seat on his local city council last year and lost but will run again in the next election cycle. He went back to college to earn his bachelor's degree and has now started work on a master's degree.

In September, Mr Turner shut down his online action toys business and devotes all of his time to keeping kratom available in its natural form.

The kratom plant comes in three different strains - white, green vein, and red vein. According to Mr Turner, different strains have different levels of alkaloids and government oversight on sales of the plant would provide better knowledge for consumers.

It took him eight weeks to get the right strain and dosage, which allowed him to function much better on a daily basis. Some days he cannot walk and his hand is seized into a claw. But with kratom, therapy is now tolerable. Mr Turner said he is prepared to move to Canada if the US decides to ban the sale of kratom.

Aaron Walker, 32, lives in California and works in the kratom industry for Edens Ethnos. He spent four years in the military from 2006 until 2010 as a Seabee for the United States Naval Construction Forces (NCF).

Mr Walker traveled the world supporting the US Marines as a heavy equipment mechanic. The work caused numerous physical injuries and he developed sciatica, a nerve condition in his back. His pain can range from a typical three level up to a ten level at which he cannot get out of bed. He was medicated with four different types of pharmaceuticals, one of which he was taking in twelve doses a day.

Mr Walker "stumbled" across kratom at a social gathering when he was introduced to a kratom advocate who gave him some of the product.

He does not deny the efficacy of the pharmaceuticals he was on but said he could not tolerate the "foginess" in his mental processes that narcotics produced.

For the past four years, he has used kratom twice a day in powdered form as a shot with chocolate milk or orange juice.

He has been able to give up almost all of his prescriptions and experiences no withdrawal or side effects from discontinued use of kratom.

What next for kratom users?

Kratom users now find themselves in limbo. A new Trump Administration may mean months of vetting and confirming new officials who will have a say in the decision about kratom's availability in the marketplace - including a new Attorney General and his subordinate DEA chief.

But for millions of Americans who claim that they have escaped opioids by means of this member of the coffee family, the decisive issue may be plain: if kratom cannot be proven to hurt people then why shouldn't Americans be able to use it?

READ MORE ABOUT:

[USA](#) [DRUGS](#) [HEALTH](#)

NEWS MOST VIEWED

- 1** Donald Trump signs executive order to build wall with Mexico: 'Beginning today the United States gets back control of its borders'
25 Jan 2017, 10:22pm
- 2** White House adviser Kellyanne Conway 'repeatedly punched man' at Trump inauguration ball
25 Jan 2017, 11:00am
- 3** Donald Trump to order construction of Mexican wall and a temporary ban on refugees from seven Muslim countries
25 Jan 2017, 11:31am
- 4** Dutch TV trolls Donald Trump's 'America First' speech in 'welcome' video
24 Jan 2017, 3:20pm