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**ADDITIONAL MATERIAL
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COMMISSIONER JACOBS**

Is "nature's speedball" the latest South Florida drug craze?

December 3, 2012|By Maria Herrera, Sun Sentinel

It's been called "nature's speedball," because it can be stimulating and also have a relaxing and pain relieving effect.

While used as a medicinal plant in some countries, in places like South Florida, the Southeast Asian plant known as kratom is making it harder for many people to stay sober.

Readily available online, at tobacco and head shops, Kava bars and specialty stores, the plant is becoming increasingly popular: some use it recreationally, others use it to manage pain, depression and other ailments and some even use it to help them beat addiction to harder drugs such as heroin, opium and pain pills.

"It's very easy to get," said Nancy Steiner, founder of The Sanctuary, a transitional living facility in [Delray Beach](#) for addicts in recovery. "It's not just a problem for the recovery community, but it's in high schools and colleges. It's a mass problem."

In the same family as the coffee tree, kratom is known for its stimulating, euphoric effects in low doses.

At high doses, however, the plant can produce effects similar to those of opiates such as heroin and opium and opiate-based pharmaceutical drugs such as Vicodin, Hydrocodone, Codeine, Morphine and OxyContin.

In Thailand, natives have used kratom to treat hypertension, diarrhea, and depression — because it has a soothing effect.

But when kratom is taken regularly at higher doses, users can experience dependency and negative side effects such as nervousness, insomnia, and constipation.

Kratom is legal in the United States, but it has been placed on the Drug Enforcement Administration list of Drugs and Chemicals of Concern.

"There is no legitimate medical use for kratom in the United States. However, it is marketed on the Internet as 'alternative medicine' for use as a painkiller, medicine for diarrhea, and other ailments and for the treatment of opiate addiction," says the DEA's drug fact sheet on kratom.

Very little is known about the plant here in the U.S. and doctors and researchers are just beginning to familiarize themselves with its effects, benefits and dangers.

"The difference between what's being used in Southeast Asia and what is being sold here is that you don't know what is being sold here," said Dr. Evan Goldstein, medical director of Boca Regional Medical Center's urgent care.

Goldstein said he has not seen any cases of people intoxicated with kratom come through the emergency room yet, but "I suspect we will," he said.

Harold Jonas, who runs several sober living residencies in [Delray Beach](#), said the recovery community is becoming more vigilant about behaviors associated with kratom because the substance doesn't show in standard drug tests used in the industry.

"I had a tenant that was recently evicted. He was passing all the drug tests but got arrested for stealing his boss' credit cards," Jonas said. "Turns out he was using kratom."

"It is habit forming and it can interact with other medications causing severe reactions," he said.

Dr. Howard Kornfeld, of Recovery Without Walls based out of Mill Valley, Calif., said he has already treated several patients with kratom addiction.

Kornfeld said he has been successful treating patients addicted to kratom with the same semi-synthetic opiate-based medications, like Suboxone, used to treat patients addicted to Oxycontin and other painkillers.

"The [kratom] withdrawals can be fairly severe," Kornfeld said. "People in recovery or people not in recovery might not realize that if they take this, they're going to get dependent on it."

Some studies, however, suggest the plant can be successful in the treatment of opiate addiction by helping patients deal with withdrawal symptoms. In a case report published in the medical journal *Addiction* titled "Self-treatment of opioid withdrawal using kratom," Dr. Edward Boyer, professor of emergency medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School Department of Emergency Medicine and other medical professionals concluded that kratom may be effective at mitigating opioid withdrawal.

"One striking finding of this report is the extent to which kratom attenuates potentially severe opioid withdrawal, yet cessation of kratom administration itself appears to be associated with modest abstinence symptoms," the report said.

The report also says that the natural history of kratom use, including its clinical pharmacology and toxicology, are poorly understood.

Nathan Brunet, a 26-year-old local costumer, said kratom has helped him cope with pain, and be more social and productive.

"For a lot of people with depression this is a viable alternative to pharmaceutical drugs," Brunet said. "Also instead of going out and drinking alcohol, I now prefer to brew some tea at home with friends and watch movies or have intelligent conversations."

Brunet said he started using it for managing pain on his shoulder, because of its analgesic properties. He said he stumbled upon it while researching medicinal plants used by indigenous people for healing and in ceremonies.

Now that he's not in pain, Brunet said he uses it socially once or twice a week.

"There are so many benefits that if people knew about it they would help themselves. But like with anything else, it can be abused."

Meherrera@tribune.com or 561-243-6544

INFO for BOX:

KRATOM FACTS

Pronounced krah-tome or kray-tum.

Kratom, or *Mitragyna speciosa*, is a large tree in the same family as the coffee tree native to Southeast Asia in the Indochina and Malasyam regions.

Kratom can be found in leaf, powder, tea, capsules and tincture form.

Kratom prices at a local Kava bar range from \$7 for a bottle of tea to \$20 for 5 grams of powder extract.