

There have been some new developments in the controversy over kratom. On February 6, 2018, FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, M.D., issued a statement on the opioid qualities of kratom. The Statement read in part, “Notably, we recently conducted a novel scientific analysis using a computational model developed by agency scientists, which provided even stronger evidence of kratom compounds’ opioid properties. These kinds of models have become an advanced, common and reliable tool for understanding the behavior of drugs in the body. We also have learned more about deaths that involved kratom use, and have identified additional adverse events related to this product. This new data adds to our body of substantial scientific evidence supporting our concerns about the safety and abuse potential of kratom . . . We have been especially concerned about the use of kratom to treat opioid withdrawal symptoms, as there is no reliable evidence to support the use of kratom as a treatment for opioid use disorder and significant safety issues exist.” The Statement said no scientific studies have been submitted to the FDA regarding the substance. The Statement concluded with the FDA’s strongest remarks so far on kratom: “Taken in total, the scientific evidence we’ve evaluated about kratom provides a clear picture of the biologic effect of this substance. Kratom should not be used to treat medical conditions, nor should it be used as an alternative to prescription opioids. There is no evidence to indicate that kratom is safe or effective for any medical use.”

In March of 2018, a Portland, Oregon company, PDX Aromatics, recalled three brands of kratom powder, because samples tested positive for salmonella.

On April 3, 2018, the FDA issued a mandatory recall of all kratom products from Pharmanaturals LLC, a Las Vegas company, because some of its products also tested positive for Salmonella. The company had failed to comply with the FDA’s request for a voluntary recall. As of that date, at least 87 cases of salmonella were reported in 35 states. The illness struck people from 6 to 67 years old.

Thus, the controversy goes on. At least 44 deaths associated with this substance have been reported. As doctors, we must be aware of the widespread use of kratom, its easy availability in Arizona and across the continents, and its potential for danger.

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