



# Frenchtown Community Coalition

Working to create a healthy, engaged, and unified community for the youth of Frenchtown

## What You Should Know About Kratom

Kratom is a plant-based substance made from the leaves of *Mitragyna speciosa*, a tree native to Southeast Asia. In the United States, it is commonly sold in gas stations, smoke shops, and online as powders, capsules, teas, liquid shots, and increasingly as gummies or candies. Because it is marketed as “natural,” many people assume it is safe. However, kratom is not approved by the FDA for any medical use, and its effects on the brain and body raise growing concerns, especially for youth.

One of the reasons kratom has become more common is because people use it for many different reasons. Some adults report using it for pain relief, anxiety, mood, or energy. Others use it to try to manage opioid withdrawal symptoms. These motivations matter because kratom use often starts quietly, framed as stress relief or self-care rather than risk-taking behavior. For teens and young adults, the appeal may also include curiosity, peer influence, and easy access, particularly when products are sold in candy-like forms.

A key term parents may hear is “7-OH,” which is short for 7-hydroxymitragynine. This is one of kratom’s active chemical compounds. While kratom leaves naturally contain small amounts of this compound, some newer products contain concentrated or enhanced levels of 7-OH. These concentrated products can have much stronger effects on the brain and body and behave more like powerful opioids.

After kratom is swallowed, its active compounds are absorbed through the digestive system and enter the bloodstream. From there, they travel to the brain. As the liver processes kratom, some of its primary compound, mitragynine, is converted into 7-hydroxymitragynine, or 7-OH. This matters because 7-OH is significantly more potent in how it affects the brain, particularly in areas related to pain, reward, and breathing.

In the brain, kratom’s compounds interact mainly with mu-opioid receptors. These are the same receptors affected by prescription opioids such as oxycodone and by heroin. Mu-opioid receptors are part of the brain’s communication system and play a major role in how we experience pain, stress, pleasure, and physical calm. When

these receptors are activated, they reduce the activity of certain brain cells. This leads to decreased pain signals, feelings of relaxation, and in some cases sedation.

Several key brain regions are affected during this process. In the brainstem, which controls breathing and basic life functions, opioid receptor activation can slow respiration. This is why opioids can be dangerous in high doses and why concentrated kratom products raise concerns about breathing suppression. In the brain’s reward system, particularly areas involved in motivation and reinforcement, kratom can increase dopamine signaling indirectly. Dopamine is a chemical messenger linked to learning and reward. When the brain connects a substance with relief or pleasure, it becomes more likely to want to repeat that behavior, which increases the risk of dependence.

One of the biggest concerns with kratom is uncertainty. Products are not standardized, and labels may not accurately reflect what is inside. The rise of concentrated 7-OH products has added another layer of risk, especially when these items are sold as gummies or flavored shots that may appeal to younger users. National poison control data show a steady increase in kratom-related exposure calls over the past decade, signaling that adverse reactions are happening in real communities, not just in isolated cases.

For youth and teens, developing brains are particularly sensitive to substances that affect reward, stress, and emotional regulation systems. Regular use can interfere with healthy coping skills and increase the risk of dependence. Because kratom is often discussed online as “safe” or “herbal,” young people may underestimate its potential impact.

If someone becomes unresponsive, has trouble breathing, or experiences a seizure after using kratom or any unknown substance, this is a medical emergency and 911 should be called immediately.

Make it a goal this new year to talk with your kids about kratom. Ask what they’ve heard and seen and discuss the affects it can have on the brain.

**Have a healthy and happy New Year!**

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