

GUEST COMMENTARY

Opinion | Don't let synthetic opioids hijack the conversation around natural kratom



by **Melody Woolf**

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The recent [Bridge Michigan commentary](#) about kratom reflects a fear that many families across the country are feeling right now: Products misleadingly sold under the “natural kratom” label are becoming increasingly confusing, increasingly potent and increasingly dangerous.

That concern should not be dismissed. Michigan communities are right to ask hard questions about what is being sold in gas stations, smoke shops and convenience stores under the kratom name.

But Michigan lawmakers and regulators also cannot afford to ignore an equally important reality: The products driving these alarming headlines and devastating

losses are not natural kratom leaf at all.

Instead, they are lab-made kratom derivatives like concentrated synthetic 7-hydroxymitragynine (7-OH), which behave far differently than natural kratom leaf — a traditional botanical consumed for generations and used today by 23 million Americans.

This distinction matters. For centuries, natural kratom leaf has been used in Southeast Asia, typically brewed as a tea or consumed in its raw form, and it has an established safety profile that dangerous synthetic derivatives do not.

Even experts who study addiction and substance misuse increasingly recognize there is a meaningful difference between traditional kratom leaf and the newer, synthetic, hyper-concentrated products now flooding the market.

In recent years, companies have begun manufacturing concentrated derivatives and synthetic formulations that exploit kratom's name and reputation while delivering effects far removed from the natural plant itself.

Some of these products contain alkaloid concentrations that greatly exceed those occurring



Melody Woolf is a Kalamazoo resident and an advocate for kratom regulation in Michigan and nationally. (Courtesy photo)

naturally in kratom leaf and are far more likely to [produce opioid-like effects](#), raising legitimate dependency and public safety risks.

Because of false advertising and lax enforcement measures, many consumers do not even realize there is a difference between natural kratom leaf and synthetic kratom derivatives — and that confusion is exactly what is fueling concern in Michigan communities.

The Clinton Township Board of Trustees recently approved the first reading of an [ordinance](#) restricting “kratom” sales to adults over 21 after hearing testimony about dangerous products being sold in gas stations and convenience stores.

But while the brightly packaged synthetic products marketed next to energy drinks and supplements deserve scrutiny, a blanket ban on natural kratom leaf would not solve that problem. It would simply sweep fundamentally different products into the same category while punishing responsible adults like me.

For years, I lived in agony from fibromyalgia, sciatica and severe chronic pain. At one point, I was taking so many prescription medications that I spent nearly a decade largely bedridden. I missed moments with my children, and my family watched me slowly disappear under the weight of both chronic pain and the medications meant to manage it.

Natural kratom leaf helped me reclaim my life. Not overnight, and not magically, but enough that I could function again, spend time with my family, and begin stepping away from the pharmaceutical regimen that had plagued my life for years.

That is why it is so frustrating to watch policymakers, media outlets, and even some advocates continue treating natural kratom leaf and concentrated synthetic kratom products as though they are interchangeable. They are not.

If Michigan fails to distinguish between natural kratom leaf and lab-made, opioid-like derivatives, lawmakers will not address community concerns. They will only make it harder to combat the real drivers of risk while stripping away an all-natural option that many responsible adults rely on every day.

Michigan lawmakers, we urge you to stop confusing the plant with the poison.

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