Kratom, the popular name for leaves of the mitragyna speciosa tree, is a botanical supplement that has grown in popularity and usage across the United States in the last few years. Originating from Southeast Asia and sold in gas stations, ‘head shops’, and through a variety of online vendors, kratom has gained an array of users who seek it’s mood elevating and pain reducing properties. In addition to the rise in popularity of kratom, it has increasingly caught the attention of state lawmakers concerned about possible negative consequences associated with unregulated sale of the non-FDA approved plant.

While kratom is currently legal under federal law, six states - Alabama, Arkansas, Indiana, Tennessee Wisconsin, and Vermont - have passed legislation banning the substance. New York and North Carolina have pending legislation that would make the possession and distribution of kratom a felony offense. In seven other states - Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, New Hampshire, and New Jersey - state legislatures have considered, but ultimately did not pass, measures banning the plant.

Lawmakers who advocate criminalization have cited concerns that kratom’s opioid-like qualities have the potential to spur abuse, addiction, and withdraw symptoms among habitual users and that the unregulated sale of kratom poses a threat to health and public safety. According to the Drug Enforcement Agency’s 2015 Drugs of Abuse catalog [2], kratom is classified as a drug of concern due to its potentially addictive properties and several reported cases where users experienced psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations and confusion.

Supporters of kratom, including advocacy groups such as the American Kratom Association [3], argue that the plant has a range of medicinal benefits such as pain relief and mood elevation and can be used as a safe alternative treatment for people suffering from chronic pain. Advocates also suggest that the use of kratom can be beneficial to people recovering from opioid addiction by helping to alleviate withdraw symptoms.

While research on potential medical uses for kratom is in its infancy, there is evidence [4] that suggests the plant can be used to lessen withdraw symptoms associated with addiction to heroin and morphine and that could kratom could be used as an treatment alternative to methadone. Another study [5] involving mice provides evidence that mitragynine, the main psychoactive compound found in kratom, could potentially be used as a treatment for depression.