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Nicholas Pettit
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Bradford Glavan

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Traditional herb or drug of abuse? A case of severe Kratom withdrawal

Nicholas Pettit, D.O., Benjamin S. Pedroja, M.D., Bradford Glavan, M.D.

Introduction

- Kratom (Mitragyna speciosa) is an herb native to Southeast Asia with opioid and stimulant-like properties that is commonly used to achieve a legal recreational high.
- Kratom purchase and consumption is legal in most U.S. states.
- Cases of acute toxicity and withdrawal have been increasing over the past decade.

What is Kratom

**History**

- Leaves were historically chewed by laborers in SE Asia to combat fatigue and to help treat aches and pains.

**Current uses**

- Commonly used as an opium substitute to treat pain or to treat mood disorders.
- Also used to obtain a recreational high.

**Effects**

- A low doses (1-5g) has stimulant effects causing increased alertness, stamina and euphoria.
- At high doses (5-15 grams) kratom acts on μ and κ opioid receptors causing increase euphoria, sedation, and analgesia.
- Effects begin 5-10 mins after use and last for 2-5 hours.

Legality of Kratom

- Kratom has a long history of abuse in SE Asia and is a controlled substance in this region.
- The DEA is aware of the dangers of Kratom, however it is not currently a scheduled substance.
- As of 2020, there are no federal laws prohibiting Kratom use. Purchase and consumption is legal in most states.

Increasing use/abuse in U.S.

- Kratom use in the U.S. has been steadily increasing since 2010 which has caused in increase in the amount of cases of acute toxicity and withdrawal.

Pre-hospital course

- Well adjusted 38 y.o. male presented with respiratory arrest requiring intubation by EMS in the field.
- Found to have pinpoint pupils and bradypnea that was minimally responsive to naloxone.

ICU course

- Transferred to ICU and quickly extubated.
- 12 hours after arrival the patient became tachycardiac, tachypneic, and developed a new tremor along with new visual hallucinations.
- Patient was restarted on his home dose of tramadol due to fear of withdrawal, symptoms persisted.
- A Fentanyl drip provided minor improvement in his tremors and hallucinations.

Case resolution

- On day 5, multiple empty bags of “Maeng Da” tea were found in the patient’s home.
- Clonidine and hydroxyzine provided further improvement in his anxiety, tremor, and tachycardia.
- Extubated on day 9.
- Once stable, induction therapy with buprenorphine was started and eventually discharged on day 18.

Kratom Withdrawal

- Withdrawal symptoms are common after discontinuing use following weeks to months of daily use.
- Kratom withdrawal begins approximately 12 hours after last use.
- Duration of kratom withdrawal is similar to that opioid withdrawal.

Symptoms of Kratom withdrawal

- Depression
- Fever
- Muscle Aches
- Anxiety and Agitation
- Diarrhea
- Halucinations
- Nausea

Treatment

- There are no concrete guidelines on management of Kratom withdrawal, however, multiple case reports have described successful treatment with symptom-triggered clonidine & scheduled hydroxyzine during acute phase.
- Case reports have also described success with transitioning patients onto long term buprenorphine-naloxone maintenance.

Learning Points

- Kratom is herb with opioid and stimulant-like properties which is legal to buy and consume in most U.S. states.
- Cases of acute toxicity and withdrawal from kratom are becoming increasingly common due to widespread availability in our community
- Many physicians are unaware of the effects of kratom and fail to ask patients about their use of herbal medications.
- Kratom withdrawal is treatable with clonidine, hydroxyzine and buprenorphine.

References


Figure left: Annual number of Kratom exposures reported to poison control centers in the U.S. from 2011 through 2017.