



PREMIUM REPORTS

Family Warns: Mysterious, Risky Drug Lurks at Corner Stores

A Virginia family is sounding alarms about kratom, billed as a natural and safe substance despite addictive traits, as officials consider restricting it.

Dean Francis, his wife Sarah, and their son Cameron in Midlothian, Va., on Aug. 12, 2025. Madalina Kilroy/The Epoch Times

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By **Janice Hisle** | September 13, 2025 Updated: September 14, 2025

MIDLOTHIAN, Va.—When Cameron Francis was a 22-year-old student at a Christian college, he thought he had found a near-miraculous, innocuous alternative to alcoholic drinks.

An athlete featured on posters promoting Liberty University’s cross-country runners, Francis took his sport seriously. But he would occasionally drink with his buddies. His girlfriend, a teetotaler, disapproved.

So, Francis searched online for something else that would help him feel more social at weekend parties.

“And that’s where I came across kratom,” Francis told The Epoch Times.

He regrets that discovery now, eight years after he first got his hands on the imported, opioid-like substance derived from a tropical evergreen.

At the time, kratom was relatively obscure in America. The federal government didn’t even survey drug users about it until 2018, a year after Francis encountered kratom.

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The advertisement features a light blue background with a faint globe. On the left, there is a blue scribble logo next to a circular logo containing the letters 'NTD'. Below this is the text 'from chaos to clarity'. On the right, there is a dark blue button with the text 'WATCH NOW' in white. Below the button, the text 'NTD.COM' is displayed next to a circular logo with 'NTD NEWS' inside. To the right of that is the text 'DOWNLOAD THE NTD APP'.

Since then, kratom products have surged in popularity, availability, and controversy.

Although backlash from kratom advocates killed a proposed national ban in 2016, lawmakers outlawed or restricted kratom-containing products in [more](#) than 20 states.

This summer, citing continuing concerns about toxicity and addiction, federal agencies took steps to ban a synthesized kratom-type product. Known as 7-OH, it’s 13 times more powerful than morphine, the Food and Drug Administration said.

These commercial products are created through complex chemical reactions using the kratom-based 7-OH compound—resulting in 500 percent more 7-OH than is naturally found in kratom leaves, according to ACS Lab, which is federally licensed to [test](#) substances such as kratom.

Currently, products containing 7-OH are sold unregulated, “making gas stations and convenience stores risky places where kids can purchase these drugs as easily as buying candy,” the FDA [said](#).

Industry advocates such as the American Kratom Association [agree](#) curbs are needed, while saying that less-potent kratom products are safe and should remain legal.

Francis said that, based on his experience, even those types of kratom are dangerous.

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STATES

Lawmakers outlawed or restricted kratom-containing products in more than 20 states.



In this photo illustration, capsules of the herbal supplement Kratom are seen in Miami on May 10, 2016. The herbal supplement is a psychoactive drug derived from the leaves of the kratom plant. Joe Raedle/Getty Images

The Allure of Kratom

No form of kratom is government-approved for medical [use](#) in the United States, but millions of people take it.

When Francis searched for an alcohol substitute, he learned that Southeast Asians have chewed and brewed leaves from the kratom (*Mitragyna speciosa*) tree for centuries. Users reported few, if any, ill effects; they touted its energizing, pain-relieving, and mood-enhancing qualities.

Kratom use spread to America after the Vietnam War, via returning soldiers and Asian immigrants, a government [report](#) states. Sales soared in recent years because of online storefronts, the COVID-19 pandemic, the opioid-addiction crisis, and government restrictions on opioid prescriptions, scholars [noted](#).

Francis recalls when he first used a powdered version of kratom, mail-ordered from California. Mixed with water, it tasted “terrible,” he said, but made him feel “way better” than alcohol ever had.

Kratom’s effects amazed him.

Kratom use spread to America after the Vietnam War, via returning soldiers and Asian immigrants, a government report states.

In school, it helped him focus on homework and test-taking.

At parties, Francis remembers friends wondering why he seemed content to sip his “tea”—a kratom-laced elixir. “They had no idea that, whatever alcohol is doing for them, this is doing way more for me,” he said.

But instead of serving as Francis’s secret weapon, that green powder became his kryptonite.

Francis and his parents shared his story with The Epoch Times as a cautionary tale.

A Virginia treatment center that helped him is seeing a surge in kratom-addicted patients. Its CEO is joining Francis’s father in his crusade to get kratom banned nationwide.

At the same time, kratom advocates and some scientists say more study is needed to decipher its potential to help—or to harm.

In this photo illustration, a liquid form of the herbal supplement kratom is poured from a bottle in Miami on May 10, 2016. Joe Raedle/Getty Images

Paradoxical Qualities

Kratom is a botanical enigma; researchers don't quite understand it.

A “cocktail of the psychoactive alkaloids occurring naturally in the plant” includes more than 40 compounds, according to a comprehensive scientific [review](#) published in 2020. Alkaloids are chemical compounds that occur naturally.

“The natural product works like a symphony orchestra where each alkaloid may have a critical role in the overall outcome,” University of Florida scientists [said](#) in 2020.

Kirsten Elin Smith, a Johns Hopkins School of Medicine professor who studies kratom, said in a 2025 [report](#) that “its pharmacology is quite unique,” and it

affects multiple bodily systems.

Kratom contains “two major psychoactive ingredients” that can cause paradoxical effects in a user’s brain, the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) [says](#).

At low doses, kratom acts as a stimulant; at higher doses, it becomes a sedative, the DEA said, and it also can cause “psychotic symptoms, and psychological and physiological dependence.”

University of Florida scientists have been [investigating](#) its risks versus its potential for managing pain and easing symptoms of opioid withdrawal.

Debate Over Kratom

Dean Francis, father of Cameron Francis, told The Epoch Times that talk of such studies does not change his opinion of kratom.

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“Kratom promoters want to talk about lab research only to distract from the insidious truth of its high addiction risk,” he said. “It operates just like an opioid and can destroy your life. The issue is: Most buyers have no idea.”

He notes that kratom has powerful allies.

Dean Francis, father of former kratom addict Cameron Francis, in Midlothian, Va., on Aug. 12, 2025. Madalina Kilroy/The Epoch Times

The American Kratom Association's board chairman is Matt Salmon, a former five-term Arizona congressman; Paul Pelosi Jr. was serving as the association's director in 2016 while his mother, Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) served as House minority leader.

Kratom is a multi-billion-dollar industry, a news [release](#) from kratom proponents said.

The kratom association, which did not respond to The Epoch Times' request for comment, says on its website that it is "dedicated to protecting the rights of all Americans to legally consume safe kratom to better manage their overall health and well-being."

Dean Francis rejects any suggestion that kratom is safe.

"The one fact that does not change, no matter the study, is that if you get addicted, you risk losing years of your life to utter torment, or worse," he said.

The Florida researchers noted that Southeast Asians used kratom for generations, apparently "with no major casualties reported." Yet Western nations report increasing problems with kratom.

Differences in consumption habits and product types could explain why, the researchers said.

While Asians chew or boil the leaves, Americans and Europeans are ingesting processed kratom—in powders, concentrated extracts, pills, and gel capsules.

And American users are more likely to combine kratom with other substances.

That is what Cameron Francis did.

Bar staff strain kratom leaves while doing prep work for their signature Kratom mocktails in Bangkok, Thailand, on Oct. 17, 2021. Lauren DeCicca/Getty Images

Higher Highs, Lower Lows

After he clashed with his new running coach and suffered a breakup with his girlfriend, Francis saw no reason to hold back on alcohol. He was thrilled to find that, when he combined it with kratom, his feelings of euphoria multiplied. “This is so incredible,” he recalls thinking then. He later realized: “I was completely hooked.”

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His drive to get kratom and alcohol began to dominate his life. Between the stellar highs, Francis said he “felt like garbage.”

“I would wake up, and it would be just like every good chemical had been completely removed from my brain ... and the only solution was more—more alcohol, more kratom,” he said.

He felt incapable of functioning without these substances. He went broke buying them, while trying to run his own fledgling video-production business.

He got into car wrecks. He got fired from a job. And he once got belligerent with police, leading to criminal charges.

Those behaviors were out of character. “It’s not who I am; it’s not the real me,” said the young man. He grew up in a Christian family with two loving, supportive parents and four siblings.

Now Francis says kratom “hijacked” his brain, heart, and soul. It changed the trajectory of his life.

When asked whether he would have tried kratom if he had any inkling that he might become addicted, he responded:

“No, no, no, no, I would never want to touch it,” he said. “I wish I could go back to the day where I didn’t know what kratom was, or what it was like to feel that euphoria.”

So do his parents.

Dean Francis and his wife, Sarah, talk about their son's experience with kratom, at their home in Midlothian, Va., on Aug. 12, 2025. Madalina Kilroy/The Epoch Times

Signs of Trouble Surface

Sarah Francis, a stay-at-home mom, loved cheering for her son at his college track meets. Cameron Francis had been a dedicated, medal-winning runner.

But suddenly, during his junior year, “he wasn’t doing well,” she said. He would half-heartedly cross the finish line.

During a heart-to-heart talk with his dad, he admitted to major problems with his new running coach—and being in that sport was the main reason he was even attending college.

After learning how severe the clashes were, Dean Francis—an alumnus of Liberty University—told his son it was OK to quit school and pursue his dream of creating music.

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Relieved, Cameron Francis left the school in 2018, his senior year. He intended to pursue a career playing or producing music and would play keyboards and guitar for hours on end, his parents said. But for a few months after leaving school, he remained in off-campus housing with friends. “He had no school, no athletics, no job. Just time,” his mother said—fertile ground for his kratom-and-alcohol addiction to deepen.

Months after their son moved back home, a disturbing incident exposed his alcohol abuse.

On Dec. 1, 2019, two police officers showed up at the Francis home during the wee hours. A vehicle registered to that address had wrecked head-on into a tree nearby.

Cameron Francis, who was addicted to kratom, at his parents' home in Midlothian, Va., on Aug. 12, 2025. Madalina Kilroy/The Epoch Times

The officers wanted to ensure that the missing driver was OK; they said alcohol typically is involved in such situations.

Consultation with the family pastor and meetings at Alcoholics Anonymous followed. Such interventions proved futile.

Nearly two agonizing years later, a medical emergency brought the underlying culprit to light after a doctor tried a new strategy.

By prescription, Cameron Francis took Naltrexone, a medication that reduces urges for alcohol or opioids by blocking effects on brain chemistry. At the time, he and his parents still believed that alcohol was his main problem—not kratom.

The young man didn't know that Naltrexone would interact with kratom, too, "blocking receptors in the brain so you don't get any high from it," Dean Francis said. That triggered "a full state of withdrawal, which is extremely dangerous," he said.

The young man knocked on his parents' bedroom door. His body was shaking and contorting; his heart was racing.

His mother took him to the hospital.

Recognizing signs of withdrawal, an emergency room doctor pressed for answers about substance abuse.

After Cameron Francis disclosed kratom use, the doctor was puzzled. He needed "to go and do a little research before he can even help Cameron," Sarah Francis said.

She and her husband then guided their son to various resources before discovering a treatment center only about 15 miles from their Midlothian home.

Treatment Center Sees Surge

He went to the Richmond-based Coleman Institute for Addiction Medicine. Its CEO, Jennifer Pius Gifford, now owns the center where she began working as a medical assistant 25 years ago.

She said kratom accounts for about 40 percent of the center's treatment clientele—an eightfold increase since 2024. And about 70 percent of phone calls to the center involve kratom.

Because of the surge, she believes "all forms of kratom should be Schedule I."

The DEA classifies drugs as Schedule I if they have "no currently accepted medical use and a high potential for abuse." It is the most restricted category and includes heroin, marijuana, and peyote.

Jennifer Pius Gifford, executive director of The Coleman Institute for Addiction Medicine, talks about the institute, in Richmond, Va., on Aug. 13, 2025. Madalina Kilroy/The Epoch Times

Gifford said most people using 7-OH become physically dependent, but “we have also had patients on regular kratom become dependent.”

People who use regular kratom may never become dependent if they use smaller amounts, she said, “but then there are some who do, and that’s when we get the call for help.”

Gifford believes her facility is among only a handful in America offering kratom-specific detoxification.

One woman told Gifford that other treatment centers responded, “There’s no such thing as a kratom detox. You don’t need a detox off that.”

Using a protocol that the clinic’s founder, Dr. Peter Coleman, spent years developing, the institute uses medications to remove addictive substances such

as alcohol, kratom, or opioids, from people's systems.

The rapid detoxification is done on an outpatient basis and takes five days or fewer—increasing the likelihood of completion versus a 30-day traditional inpatient treatment with a price tag of \$20,000 or more.

The Coleman Institute has affiliates in several cities; Gifford points to a map with pins marking spots where treated patients live, as far away as California. One woman there paid only a \$20 insurance copay to undergo detox, Gifford said.

A map with pins shows the locations from which people have come to seek treatment at the Coleman Institute for Addiction Medicine in Richmond, Va., on Aug. 13, 2025. Madalina Kilroy/The Epoch Times

After detox, “the work isn't done,” she said.

The institute, which handles several hundred cases per year, connects patients and their families with other services to tackle addiction-related issues. For more than 90 percent of patients, that means facing unresolved trauma that caused them to self-medicate, Gifford said.

Some people are more vulnerable to addiction than others, perhaps because of life experiences or differences in brain chemistry. Gifford said their loved ones need to understand “this is a disease that is going to be with them for the rest of their lives.”

Dr. Craig Swainey, a former cancer doctor who became addicted to opiates, gains credibility with clients at Coleman by admitting up-front: “I'm in recovery. Relapse is part of my story. I just tell you that because I don't want you to think I'm looking down on you.”

He told The Epoch Times that he has treated people from all walks of life, including other medical professionals and even priests.

Dr. Craig Swainey (L), the national medical director of The Coleman Institute, and executive director Jennifer Pius Gifford, talk during an interview in Richmond, Va., on Aug. 13, 2025. Madalina Kilroy/The Epoch Times

Addicts' loved ones have a hard time understanding why addicts cannot use common sense and quit habits that cause so much harm to themselves and to everyone around them.

But the addict may be unable to see the problems clearly because addiction causes "major changes in how your brain works, functions, and what you think is okay," Swainey said.

Relapse becomes part of the recovery process when patients "don't learn how to manage stress and how to cope with everything they've been through," he said.

Detoxification is more complicated with polysubstance abuse, which often accompanies kratom. In addition, kratom comes in many varieties. Those factors add to the complexity of treating kratom addiction—often unbeknownst to its users, Swainey said.

“People see kratom as a safe alternative to a lot of things, because they can pick it up in the corner shop,” he said, “and most of the folks at the corner shop don’t give good, accurate information about the drug.”

Repeat Customers

Gifford and her husband, Neal Gifford, told The Epoch Times about their experiences in a Richmond-area shop that sells kratom.

A clerk in his 20s showed them an array of kratom products filling a 20-foot space, Neal Gifford asked whether the 7-OH type was addictive. He said the young man replied, “No, not at all ... people love it so much that they will come in sometimes two or three times a day to buy it!”

Jennifer Gifford said that response infuriated her. “I just wanted to scream and say, ‘Do you know what you’re doing?... People are coming in three times a day not because they just love it. No, it’s because they have to! They’re addicted.’”

Some patients who beat heroin addiction regret taking kratom because that addicted them, too, she said. Some reported spending more than \$100 per day on 7-OH to stave off withdrawal symptoms that they say are worse than quitting heroin.

While regulators seem to be focused on 7-OH, some people who used less-potent forms of kratom still needed to go through detox in years past, Jennifer Gifford said. That’s why she believes it, too, needs to be regulated.

Compassion for Addicts

After a five-day outpatient detox at Coleman last year, Cameron Francis continued to fight “massive cravings and setbacks,” his father said, enduring “a journey I would not wish on my worst enemy.”

The 30-year-old described withdrawal: “You can’t get comfortable. You can’t take a deep breath ... Your nose is running. Your eyes are watering. It’s painful. It’s mental pain. And psychological terror, physical pain. It’s everything. It’s like the worst pain you can go through.”

He said he thought he could “white-knuckle” his way out of addiction.

Cameron Francis speaks at his parents' home in Midlothian, Va., on Aug. 12, 2025. Madalina Kilroy/The Epoch Times

That didn't work.

"It's not the same as just working hard, having a hard work ethic or discipline," Cameron Francis said. "It's your own body fighting against you ... and willpower is not something that can help you fight it."

Like many people, he once looked down on addicts. He had previously believed "they're just choosing to do this ... they're not strong enough to make the right decision ... just unintelligent, low lifes."

He learned that is a false stereotype. While he has met addicts from "a really rough background," others were "very upstanding, good, intelligent people" from a "solid family" much like his own.

Asked what he would say to a person considering taking kratom, Cameron Francis offered this advice: "Know that this is what you're getting into ... you're going to enjoy it—a lot." But that will be followed by wanting more and more of it.

As the habit becomes increasingly unaffordable, the effects also become less pleasurable, he said, warning, “You’re going to be a miserable person as your life goes into shambles.”

He hopes that society can learn an important lesson from stories like his.

When addicts are behaving badly, people ought to remember: “There’s a real person under there that needs help.”

“Anytime I felt judged ... or I was upsetting someone because of my choices, it made me want to dive deeper into addiction,” he said.

Thus, he said, the closest thing he has seen to a “cure” for addiction is “compassion and kindness, and things like that.”

It’s a message he hopes to convey with his music someday.

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