

## Should we aim for harm reduction or absolute safety? Herbal supplement Kratom puts FDA risk calibration to the test

[T]he issue of whether or not to ban kratom is an excellent litmus test of whether the Biden administration will actually use the philosophy of [harm reduction](#) to [guide drug policy](#)—or just spout the trendy catchphrase as window dressing to hide ongoing engagement in the war on drugs.

An estimated [10–16 million](#) Americans currently use kratom as an alternative to opioids, most commonly to treat pain or as a substitute for street drugs. The herb, formally known as *Mitrogyna speciosa*, has a centuries-long history of use in herbal medicine in Southeast Asia—notably as a substitute for opium.

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Kratom does appear to be far safer than all illegal and most prescription opioids: a CDC study of some [27,000 overdoses](#) that occurred between 2016 and 2017 found that it was implicated in less than 1 percent of deaths. Given the large number of people who regularly use it and the low number of fatalities, researchers estimate that it is more than 1,000 times [less likely to kill](#) than typical prescription opioids.

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If we are genuinely to enact harm reduction policy, we have to change this. Banning a substance that does less harm than other widely available substitutes will make things worse.

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