

KHAT: IS IT MORE COFFEE OR COCAINE?

The narcotic leaf is a time-honored tradition in Africa but illegal in the U.S. where demand is growing

For centuries the "flower of paradise" has been used legally in East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula as a stimulant and social tonic.

But in the United States khat is illegal, and an increased demand for the plant in cities such as Washington and San Diego is leading to stepped up law enforcement efforts and escalating clashes between narcotics officers and immigrants who defend their use of khat as a time-honored tradition.

In the last few years, San Diego, which has a large Somali population, has seen an almost eight-fold increase in khat seizures. Nationally, the amount of khat seized annually at the country's ports of entry has grown from 14 metric tons to 55 in about the last decade.

Most recently, California joined 27 other states and the federal government in banning the most potent substance in khat, and the District of Columbia is proposing to do the same. Increased immigration from countries such as Ethiopia, Yemen and Somalia has fueled the demand in this country and led to a cultural conflict.

In the Horn of Africa and parts of the Middle East, khat is a regular part of life, often consumed at social gatherings or in the morning before work and by students studying for exams. Users chew the plant like tobacco or brew it as a tea. It produces feelings of euphoria and alertness that can verge on mania and hyperactivity depending on the variety and freshness of the plant.

But some experts are not convinced that its health and social effects are so benign. A World Health Organization report found that consumption can lead to increased blood pressure, insomnia, anorexia, constipation and general malaise. The report also said that khat can be addictive and lead to psychological and social problems.



Khat Fast Facts

- Used legally in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula as a stimulant
- Growing popularity in California within the large immigrant population; now banned in 28 states as a potent substance
- Effects include increased blood pressure, insomnia, constipation and general malaise; can lead to psychological and social issues

"It is not coffee. It is definitely not like coffee," said Garrison Courtney, spokesman for the Drug Enforcement Administration. "It is the same drug used by young kids who go out and shoot people in Africa, Iraq and Afghanistan. It is something that gives you a heightened sense of invincibility, and when you look at those effects, you could take out the word 'khat' and put in 'heroin' or 'cocaine'."

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Khat comes from the leaves and stems of a shrub and must be shipped in overnight containers to preserve its potency. It contains the alkaloid cathinone, similar in chemical structure to amphetamine but about half as potent, according to Nasir Warfa, a researcher in cross-cultural studies at Queen Mary University of London.

The United Kingdom determined last year that evidence does not warrant restriction of khat. In the United States, the substance has been illegal under federal law since 1993.

But the world supply of khat is exploding. Countries such as Ethiopia and Kenya now rely on it as a major cash crop to bolster their economies. Khat is Ethiopia's second largest export behind coffee.

Khat usage has grown so much in San Diego that Assemblyman Joel Anderson (R-San Diego) wrote a 2008 bill that added cathinone and its derivative cathine to California's list of Schedule II drugs along with raw opium, morphine and coca leaves.

Anderson's bill made possession of khat a misdemeanor in California, punishable by up to one year in county jail and a \$1,000 fine. Possession of the leaf with intent to sell is a felony that carries a three-year maximum sentence in state prison.

In some cases, khat seizures have resulted in warnings and probation. In other instances, like New York City's "Operation Somali Express" bust in 2006, which led to the seizure of 25 tons of khat worth an estimated \$10 million, the perpetrators were sent to jail for up to 10 years.

"In my mind, [such arrests are] wrong," said an Ethiopian-born cabdriver who was arrested in November in a Washington, D.C., khat bust and spoke on condition of anonymity. "They act like they know more about khat than I know."



From: Cynthia Dizikes for The Los Angeles Times

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