

## Khat Use in Ethiopia: Which direction to take?

Nasir Tajure Wabe

Clinical Pharmacy Unit, Pharmacy Department, College of Public Health and Medical Science, Jimma University, P.O.BOX 251 1480, Jimma, Ethiopia (e-mail: zenastaj@yahoo.com)

One of the most common forms of drug use and abuse in many East African nations involves chewing parts of the khat plant. Khat use has increased steadily over the last 50 years and has become a problem of significant social and medical importance. Because of its social acceptability and euphoriant effects, khat chewing often plays a dominant role in celebrations, meetings, marriages, and other gatherings. Khat use even has been prevalent in the Somali military. It has been issued to soldiers in their daily rations with the intention of inhibiting their need for food and sleep, as well as increasing their aggression.<sup>[1]</sup> The amount of khat chewed per user is 100 to 200 g of leaves and stems over 3 to 4 hours. The tender leaves and stems, which lose their potency 1 day after harvest, are chewed and the juice is swallowed.<sup>[1]</sup> Khat has a sweet taste and an astringent action. Large amounts of liquids are consumed while chewing because of the dryness induced by the plant.<sup>[2]</sup>

Khat leaves have been used in traditional medicine for the treatment of depression, fatigue, hunger, obesity, and gastric ulcers. The subjective

effects of khat include euphoria, intellectual efficiency, and alertness in most subjects, while others report only dysphoria and mild sedation. The expression of these effects appears to be affected by environmental factors.<sup>[3]</sup>

However, severe adverse effects have been associated with khat use: Migraine, cerebral hemorrhage, MI, and pulmonary edema have been described, particularly in older and predisposed individuals. A case report of a 56-year-old patient with diffuse abnormality in the deep white matter of both cerebral hemispheres suggested a rapidly progressive leukoencephalopathy that was likely precipitated by khat use.<sup>[4]</sup>

The chewing of khat leaves is common in the Horn of Africa, but in eastern Ethiopia it is both big business and a big worry for the authorities.

Khat is a major agricultural crop. Yet, many say it is addictive, harmful to health and a threat to young people. In the Hararge region of Ethiopia it is hard to avoid the impact of the stimulant leaf.



Figure 1: Khat trade at Awadai market, Hararge region in Eastern Ethiopia.

For example, Awadai market, Hararge region in Eastern Ethiopia, is an international market for khat. Over 25,000 kg pass through it daily. The buyers and sellers take their jobs seriously, shouting to one another in the local dialect of Afaan Oromo. They gesture excitedly as they trade hundreds of dollars daily for the khat. The first thing that strikes you in the main market in Awadai is the deafening noise. The market square is a scene of total chaos as you make your way through bustling crowds preoccupied with the business of bartering for a prized commodity - the green leafed plant khat.<sup>[5]</sup>

Khat is chewed for hours and users say it "elevates your mood and stimulates your mind". Ethiopia's Hararge region is the main area for cultivation of the crop. Acres and acres of khat farms can be seen far into the distance. In every town, people spend their spare time chewing the stimulant leaf. It is part of the culture of Hararge. Khat is a cash crop which really benefits the khat growers, traders and the government. In 1999-2000, Ethiopia earned approximately \$60 million from khat cultivation. The employment created through khat cultivation is very high as large numbers of people are involved in growing, harvesting, sorting, packing, transporting, loading and unloading the commodity.<sup>[6]</sup>

The wood of the plant is used for fuel and, because of its resistance to termites, is used to make and fences. Khat is also believed to have medicinal value, being used locally to treat influenza, gonorrhoea and asthma.

Khat cultivation is expanding at an amazing rate as farmers realise its earning potential. It is exported to Djibouti, Somalia, Yemen and Britain. Khat has become Ethiopia's biggest export, second only to coffee.

But despite the cash earnings and the tradition of khat growing and use among the Hararge people, Ethiopia's regional government does not encourage it.

Non-users condemn chewing, but the number of users is increasing, particularly among the youth.

In urban areas, the use of khat combined with alcohol, is having an adverse effect on family life. Many students and lecturers at schools and colleges chew khat because they say it increases their concentration.<sup>[5]</sup>

But in the Hararge, Somali and Afar regions, business punctuality is a frequent problem, as the time after lunch is usually spent chewing khat.

Khat is banned in some western countries,<sup>[7]</sup> but Ethiopia's central government has no clear policy on the stimulant. The issue is left for regional governments to decide. Even in regions like Tigray, where the plant has been banned, cultivation and usage continues and attempts to replace khat with cash crops like coffee have failed. Experts agree that more research needs to be done before rash decisions are made and livelihoods ruined. They say that the best knowledge comes from Ethiopia's khat farmers and advise that the government work more closely with them to decide whether khat really is good for Ethiopia's long-term development.

## REFERENCES

1. Randall T. Khat Abuse Fuels Somali Conflict, Drains Economy. JAMA. 1992; 269:12-15.
2. Osol A, Farrar GE Jr. The Dispensatory of the United States of America. 25th ed.
3. Nencini P, Ahmed AM, Elmi AS. Subjective effects of khat chewing in humans. Drug Alcohol Depend. 1986; 18:97-105.
4. Morrish PK, Nicolaou N, Brakkenberg P, Smith PE. Leukoencephalopathy associated with khat misuse. J Neurol Neurosurg Psychiatry. 1999; 67:556.
5. Ethiopia's khat dilemma. BBC World News. 20 August, 2002. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/2203489.stm>
6. United Nations emergencies unit for Ethiopia monthly situation report for Ethiopia - august 1995. <http://www.ocha.org/Archive/DownloadableReports/strp0895.pdf>
7. Cox G, Rampes H. Adverse effects of khat: a review. APT 2003, 9:456-463.

Source of Support: Nil  
Conflict of interest: None declared