



# Feds Get Rare 'Gas Station Heroin' Conviction

**A California man has been convicted of smuggling and misbranding tianeptine after selling the unapproved drug as a “mood enhancer.”**

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September 13, 2023

A California man has been convicted of smuggling tianeptine into the U.S. from China, in one of the few federal prosecutions involving the unapproved drug colloquially called “gas station heroin.”

Ryan Stabile, 36, pleaded guilty to conspiracy to one count of smuggling tianeptine and two counts of introduction of misbranded drugs with intent to defraud and mislead last week. He will be sentenced in January, with the smuggling crime carrying up to five years in prison and the introduction of misbranded drugs charge up to three years.

The case comes as more states have banned tianeptine, which mimics opioids and is causing extreme withdrawal in some users, including nausea, chills, restless legs, and extreme anxiety. It’s also been [linked to fatal overdoses](#) but is easily available at gas stations and convenience stores all over the country. Tianeptine is a regulated antidepressant in over 60 countries around the world but it is not an approved drug in the U.S., though it’s not federally illegal. However, it is routinely—and illegally—marketed as a dietary supplement or nootropic (substance that can enhance cognitive function), with claims that it can help with anxiety, depression, pain, and brain function.

The Food and Drug Administration has issued some vendors warning letters about selling tianeptine, but federal prosecutions are extremely rare.

Stabile was charged in October 2019 after he bought tianeptine from China and resold it on his site Supplements for Work, marketing it as a “mood enhancer” that “improved cognitive functioning,” according to the U.S. Attorney’s Office for Massachusetts.

His site said the tianeptine was “for research purposes only, even though he sold tianeptine to individuals for personal use,” authorities said.

A man who identified himself as a former Supplements for Work customer, John, told VICE News the site was popular for purchasing tianeptine at the time. But John, 55, who didn’t want his last name used, alleged he and others felt there was a decline in quality and believed that the product was being diluted.

Because tianeptine isn’t regulated in the U.S., there’s no way of knowing what’s actually in the products being sold, many of which use proprietary blends.

John said around the same time as Stabile’s arrest, Reddit—where many tianeptine users congregate—cracked down on tianeptine sellers soliciting customers on the site.

Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, Minnesota, Georgia, Oklahoma, Michigan, Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio have banned tianeptine, but it is not a federally scheduled drug. Nonetheless, the FDA can launch enforcement against sellers of tianeptine who make claims that it can help with diseases or impact the structure or function of the body, according to Andrew Ittleman, a Miami-based lawyer who specializes in food and drug law.

Ittleman likened the situation to someone selling water that they claimed could cure cancer.

“If I broadcast that loudly enough, don't be surprised when the FDA says, ‘OK, this is a drug now because you're making these drug claims about it. And we want it to go through our approval process before you can market it to patients in the United States.’”

At that point, he said the FDA would check to see if the manufacturing process is in line with FDA regulations, and if it isn't, they have grounds to say it's adulterated. They can also say it's misbranded because "there's no possible adequate instruction for use because we haven't approved it."

As for the smuggling charge, Ittleman said he often sees those come up when products such as steroids that are bought from China and imported into the U.S. are mislabelled to allow them to escape customs scrutiny.

John said after Stabile's arrest, "a lot of the sites made sure that they only put it down as a research chemical, that it's not intended for human consumption." But he said he doesn't think that will deter people from buying and consuming it.

"They already know what it is, like I did. They've done research. They've had it off the shelves in Florida and they've found a way to get it online because it's cheaper," he said, adding an influx of customers is buying it online because it's been banned where they live.

"The other ones are traveling together. They're hopping states... and buying as much as they can and bringing it back. It's crazy."

In June 2022, a Denver couple was sentenced to six months in prison each for selling tianeptine and "multiple other unapproved and misbranded drugs," according to the Colorado U.S. Attorney's Office.

The pair, Mark and Linda Godding, told customers their products were subject to independent testing and "compulsive" quality control, but "they rarely tested any of their products before selling them to consumers, even after receiving complaints of side effects," authorities said, including vomiting and increased heart rate.

Some local police departments have also targeted tianeptine vendors who continued to sell the drugs after state bans.