



Synthetic Drugs: A Real Danger

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Parents, educators and police often worry about illicit drugs or prescription medications falling into the hands of our children illegally. We are aware of the dangers of street drugs and the abuse of over-the-counter medications, but recently there has been an increase in the use of substances known as synthetic drugs in our community.

These substances aim to mimic the effects of illegal drugs such as marijuana, cocaine or methamphetamine. Even more alarming is the fact that these substances can be purchased at some local stores without restrictions because the chemicals used have not been classified as illegal.

Even though these substances are intended to produce the effects of some illegal drugs, they sometimes have unintended effects. Local medical personnel recently responded to an emergency call when a teenager went into seizures after ingesting a product labeled as incense.

Some people may believe that because they can purchase these items over the counter, they are less hazardous than controlled substances, but this is not the case. The American Association of Poison Control Centers reports that in all of 2010, poison centers reported 2,874 calls about the products. That number will be overshadowed for the current year - as of April 20, poison centers reported 1,639 calls thus far for 2011.



These products have become popular nationwide. Manufacturers avoid the law and testing requirements by claiming they are not intended for human consumption. Chemicals intended to imitate the effects of marijuana are added to plant material and labeled as incense. Other products come in a crystal or powder form and are branded as "bath salt."

Locally, synthetic marijuana can be found at several stores across the city. The product is labeled as incense but is displayed in conjunction with glass pipes and other smoking paraphernalia. The packages carry names such as Peace of Mind, Aftershock and Colorado Chronic. The material in the packages bears close resemblance to dried marijuana, but it is unknown what the green, leafy substance really is.

Prices can vary depending on the brand and amount. At a minimum, \$10 will buy a small foil package, with some other products going for as much as \$59.

Some of the packages do include chemical names, while others contain no information about what is used in their manufacture. In essence, a person ingesting these synthetic drugs has no idea what chemicals they are inhaling.

Late last year, the Drug Enforcement Agency placed a temporary ban on five specific chemicals associated with synthetic marijuana. In addition to their abuse and other factors, the DEA cites the following information its website:

“These five synthetic cannabinoids alone or spiked on plant material have the potential to be extremely harmful due to their method of manufacture and high pharmacological potency. There is little information regarding the pharmacology, toxicology, and safety of these substances in humans given the minimal amount of pre-clinical investigations undertaken regarding these substances; therefore, the full danger of these drugs has not yet been determined.”

In other reports from emergency rooms, side effects of using the products include anxiety attacks, elevated heart rates, vomiting, even convulsions. Diagnosing a person exhibiting signs of drug use can be difficult because many of the compounds do not register on typical drug screening tests.

As a result of an informal inquiry, the Fort Morgan Police Department believes there have been at least 12 cases where young adults have sought emergency medical attention after ingesting synthetic drug substances.

States and municipalities have targeted synthetic drugs by looking for ways to ban the substances. In some cases the manufacturers are able to skirt specific laws by slightly altering the chemical make-up of the compounds so they no longer are identical to the list of banned products. Colorado has introduced a bill that would add synthetic cannabinoids to the statutory list of Schedule I controlled substances, but the bill has not yet been made into law.

Educating the community about synthetic drugs is important. Synthetic drugs should not be considered a safe alternative to using illicit drugs. Parents and educators should be aware of packaging containing green leafy substances, claiming to be incense. In addition, smoking paraphernalia such as pipes or rolling papers may also be present.

Signs that a person may be using or is under the influence of synthetic drugs are the same as other types of narcotics. If a person's behavior changes, or there is a change of eating or sleeping patterns, a new group of friends, or other noticeable changes, it is cause for concern.

It's likely that at some point in the future synthetic drugs will be declared illegal, but until then, we must educate ourselves and inform the youth of our community about the dangers of all drugs, real and synthetic.