

Synthetic drugs: Popular but dangerous

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(Editor's Note: This is the first in a series of articles detailing the dangers of synthetic drugs.)

“Synthetic drugs” are becoming a popular but dangerous new way for both youngsters and adults to get high.

One of the reasons is that they can be purchased legally at many convenience stores and gas stations because they are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Some of the most popular are bath salts, potpourri, incense, synthetic marijuana, plant food, lazy cakes and downer drinks.

“There are dozens and dozens of these products on the market and there are new products being introduced everyday,” said Lisa Cannon, prevention coordinator for the Gratiot County Substance Abuse Coalition.

Since they are not regulated by the FDA there are no restrictions or control on what chemicals are used.

“The bath salts and synthetic marijuana are labeled, ‘Not for Human Consumption,’ which allows individuals and companies selling this product to circumvent the Controlled Substance Act,” Cannon explained. “They are labeled that way to attract young people.

“For example, one product, called Scooby Snax, has the same picture on the front as the Scooby fruit snacks you can purchase for your child in Walmart.”

Some of the brand names for bath salts include Blizzard, Blue Silk, Ivory Snow, Wave, Ocean Burst, Pure Ivory, Purple Wave, Snow Leopard, and Vanilla Sky, among many others.

“The chemical compound in bath salts effects serotonin levels in your brain,” Cannon said. “It initially mimics a high similar or comparable to doing ecstasy, as a user continues to use the effects are more like methamphetamine.

“Using products containing synthetic stimulants can cause chest pains, increased blood pressure, increased heart rate, agitation, hallucinations, extreme paranoia and delusions.”

Bath salts can be smoked, injected or snorted.

The effects of smoking synthetic marijuana can range from experiencing a high similar to regular marijuana to having psychotic episodes, Cannon added.

“The chemicals in synthetic marijuana remain longer in the brain and other organs,” she said. “They are also not as quick to bind to receptors in the body as THC, which means that there is an increased risk of overdose as individuals ingest more because the effect can’t immediately be felt.

“Individuals can experience paranoia, delusions, and suicidal thoughts that may not go away for weeks.”

Synthetic marijuana can be smoked in a joint or a pipe, just like the regular kind.

“The main reason this product has become so popular is that it’s legal,” Cannon said. “It also does not show up in a standard urine drug test.”

That’s one reason some people who smoke regular marijuana prefer the synthetic variety because they can smoke it without any legal ramifications, she added.

Despite the dangers, the use of synthetic drugs is skyrocketing.

Just two months into 2012, there were 251 calls related to bath salts alone reported to poison control centers nationwide.

That compares with 236 calls for all of 2010.

Synthetic drugs are just as addictive as any other drugs, Cannon said.

“They have some of the same molecular structure as meth, cocaine, ecstasy and heroin,” she explained. “One of the scariest things is because this product is not regulated by the FDA the consumer has no idea what is in the package they bought.

“A consumer may purchase two of the same brand of synthetic marijuana or bath salts. One package may not have any effect at all and the second pack will cause them to have a psychotic episode.”

Among the other popular synthetic drugs is Plant Food, which is labeled as just that but mimics the effects of meth and cocaine. It can be distributed in capsule form then broke apart and the powder is smoked or snorted by users.

Lazy cakes and downer drinks contain melatonin and valerian root that in certain doses are comparable to valium or tranquilizers. They can cause impairment to the central nervous system, breathing difficulties and nausea.

Michigan has banned the chemical compounds K2 and Spice that are used in making synthetic drugs, Cannon said. The FDA put a one year ban on the substances last year and extended it six months in February.

“The problem is when the DEA or the state of Michigan tries to enact a law regarding this issue the individuals making the synthetic marijuana and bath salts reformulate the chemical compounds,” she explained. “This allows the product to resurface on the market with similar effects.”

Some products marketed as potpourri, incense, plant food and bath salts are simply not being used for the intended purpose, Cannon added.

“The purposes of these products are getting high,” she said. “Individuals and companies producing these products think since they put on the package, ‘Not for Human Consumption,’ they are justified in selling them.

“Let me note, the businesses are doing nothing illegal by selling these products. It comes down to them knowing what the products are being used for and choosing to continue selling them.”

Cannon’s agency, with the help of Sgt. Richard Ramereiz of the St. Louis Police Department and Lt. Matt Schooley of the Alma Police Department, have made a number of public presentations in an attempt to educate the community regarding the dangers of synthetic drugs.

In addition, the Gratiot County Collaborative and Gratiot County Substance Abuse Coalition are forming a work group to address the issue.

A free parent guide is available online at www.drugfree.org.

Anyone who wants more information can call Cannon at 989-462-0142 or email her at lisa@linkforfamilies.org.