

Despite dangers, synthetic marijuana use goes sky-high

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This Feb. 15, 2010, file photo shows a package of K2, a form of synthetic marijuana made up of dried herbs sprayed with chemicals. AP

Fake pot: It's legal, is sold in gas stations and convenience stores everywhere, and to some it sounds pretty harmless with names like "Mr. Nice Guy" and "Spice."

But so called "synthetic marijuana" has left such a trail of emergency room visits and possibly even deaths in its wake that 10 states have banned it, four more are trying to and one local police officer is pleading with shopkeepers not to sell it until Florida lawmakers follow suit.

Lantana officer Nelson Berrios mentors dozens of children ages 11 to 21, but says it was his middle-school-age son who brought home the message:

"The kids at school are smoking fake pot they're buying at the gas station near school," Berrios recalls the boy saying at the dinner table not long ago.

Since then, Berrios has been Googling a lot. What is this stuff? Who sells it? What does it do to a person's brain?

At the same time, counselors in Palm Beach County's addiction recovery community say they have been asking similar questions, and the answers they

and others are finding scare them.

Fake pot often comes in tea bag-sized packets, with labels in some cases that announce: "Not for human consumption."

It's sold by shopkeepers as incense. But it's not much of an air freshener. Instead, it's any one of a variety of herbal plants, sprayed with a chemical designed to mimic the active ingredient in pot: THC.

"I guarantee you it will not smell good in your house with this stuff burning," Berrios said.

And with other labeling such as "100 percent drug test safe," and its positioning on sales racks beside pipes and bongs, there's little doubt of its true purpose, he added.

It is sold for up to \$30 for 3 grams, a higher price than the real deal, and completely legal and impossible to detect on a traditional drug urine test.

The American Association of Poison Control Centers has fielded 1,670 calls this year from emergency room doctors and panicked members of the public over the substance.

That's up from 14 in 2009. But synthetic marijuana wasn't even on the organization's radar until last fall, so it's not a perfect comparison, said the group's spokeswoman Jessica Wehrman.

Still, she added, it's indicative of the drug's skyrocketing popularity during the past year.

Hanley Center's heads-up

Earlier this week, the Hanley Center in West Palm Beach invited school teachers, drug counselors and medical professionals to an hourlong talk to give many of them their first lesson on the fake marijuana, which often acts on a person in a way that is nothing like the well-known weed.

Marijuana highs are often associated with sleepiness, perhaps paranoia, but the symptoms poison control authorities report hearing about the synthetic version include dizziness, nausea, agitation, abnormally fast heartbeat and hallucinations. Some patients are in a coma, others have heart dysrhythmia .

News accounts tentatively link some form of fake pot to the deaths of at least three teens - one each in Texas, Wisconsin and Iowa. Parents in one of the deaths say their child was high on the drug when he made a fatal mistake behind the wheel of a car. The family of another claims he shot himself after

smoking it.

No deaths have been linked to fake pot in Florida, but poison control officials say they're averaging one call per week, mostly from hospital ERs, said Wendy Stephan, health education coordinator at the Florida Poison Information Center at the University of Miami.

Five calls so far this year have come from Palm Beach County, Stephan said. The big source of complaints: Mr. Nice Guy .

So what's in Mr. Nice Guy? No ingredients are listed, but the recipe for all synthetic marijuana is similar (and peddled on a variety of websites).

Of course, there's a plant involved, but any of several will do. The part that delivers the high is sprayed on the plant and can come from several compounds, such as JWH-018.

JWH-018 was created by an undergraduate student in a Clemson University laboratory in the summer of 1995, reports research Professor John W. Huffman.

It was created not to get thousands of people stoned, but to "investigate the biological effects of compounds with biology similar to marijuana," Huffman said.

"It should absolutely not be used as a recreational drug," he added.

The recipe is sold online, sometimes as plant food.

The Drug Enforcement Administration considers JWH-018 and several other compounds made to mimic THC to be "drugs and chemicals of concern," but they are not regulated, according to Florida's Drug Control Director, Bruce Grant, who is seeking to ban them in Florida.

Minimizing the dangers

Kevin Bandy, adolescent outpatient coordinator at the Hanley Center, says he worries that for too long our culture has minimized marijuana as a serious drug, even though in the past two decades what has been sold on the streets is at least three times more potent.

Minimizing pot means synthetic pot doesn't sound so bad, he said.

"If this was synthetic meth or synthetic heroin, nobody would be buying it at gas stations," Bandy said.

It was selling well at the Shell gas station on 10th Avenue North near the interstate until the owners learned what it could do to a person.

"We just quit selling it. It's not good for the people," said Anish Karmacharga, whose family owns the station.

But Monica Lee, co-owner at The Hidden Treasure smoke shop in suburban West Palm Beach, figures she'll keep selling it as long as it's legal.

After all, only people 18 or older are allowed in the smoke shop, she says.

"I sell it as incense," Lee said when asked about the reported dangers of smoking the stuff. "I don't know what they do when they leave the store."