

Main Points

- Emergency physicians are seeing an alarming increase in the number of emergency patients being treated for synthetic (chemically enhanced) drug use. Sixty percent of users are age 25 or younger.
- In 2010, poison centers nationwide responded to about 3,200 calls related to synthetic marijuana and bath salts. In 2011, that number jumped to more than 13,000 calls.ⁱ The trend is expected to continue.
- Harmful effects include impaired perception, reduced motor control, extreme paranoia and violent episodes. These drugs can be highly addictive.
- The synthetic drug problem is bad, getting worse, affecting the youth and killing many of them.
- Emergency medicine is essential to America, providing lifesaving and critical care to millions of patients each year.

What is synthetic marijuana?

Synthetic drugs are chemically enhanced drugs. Synthetic marijuana (often known as “K2” or “Spice”) and bath salts products are often sold in legal retail outlets as “herbal incense” and plant food, respectively, and labeled “not for human consumption” to mask their intended purpose and avoid FDA oversight.

These drugs contain chemicals that imitate the hallucinogenic or stimulant properties of marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy and methamphetamine, which can create severe paranoia that may cause users to harm themselves or others.

Use of synthetic marijuana is very high. More than 11 percent of seniors in high school have used Spice or K2 in the past year, making it the most commonly used illicit drug among their age group.ⁱⁱ

What are “bath salts”?

Make no mistake, these are not actually bath salts or any type of bath products. Instead this term is an informal “street name” for a family of designer drugs. Their only known purpose is for consumption as a recreational drug and have no medicinal value. These drugs are intentionally mislabeled by their manufacturers as “bath salts,” “plant food,” “air freshener,” etc. in order to trick purchasers into thinking the drugs are mild or innocuous. Sixty percent of the users involve patients ages 25 years old and younger.ⁱⁱⁱ

These drugs are derivatives of methcathinone, also known as khat.^{iv} As a derivative of a Schedule I drug, the federal Controlled Substances Act would then designate these drugs as schedule I “to the extent that they are intended for human consumption.” These synthetic drugs are sold with labeling “not intended for human consumption,” clearly circumventing the Controlled Substances Act. With this labeling, drug dealers can and do call their products whatever they choose.

Marketing websites report that these drugs are legal in all 50 states. In fact, many are sold over the counter in places like convenience stores and head shops.^v Dr. Smith also says that the vast majority of these drugs do not show up on standard drug screening, so the magnitude of the problem is probably seriously underestimated or perhaps under-realized.

What can these drugs do to a person?

These bath salts can have very harmful effects on its users. Some involve bizarre, violent behavior and tragic outcomes. Users have reported impaired perception, reduced motor control, extreme paranoia and violent episodes. These synthetic drugs have been popular among teens and young adults, and are sold at retail outlets and over the Internet. These drugs can also be highly addictive to its users.

The use of synthetic drugs have led to several tragic outcomes. For example, there was a boy in Louisiana who snorted bath salts and spent the next few days experiencing intermittent psychotic episodes which resulted in him committing suicide. In another case, there was a teen in Illinois who smoked synthetic marijuana and died when he drove his car into a house. He crashed into the bedroom of a 2-year-old child, who, fortunately, was playing in the backyard at the time.

Another case in Tennessee happened when a patient walked into the emergency department naked, trying to remove the “snake” that was attacking him from his body. There was also a case where an adult male attacked his girlfriend’s children because he believed they were demons who were attacking him. He repeatedly peppered sprayed the two and four year old children and had to be subdued by police. Both of these cases involved bath salts.

What are emergency physicians seeing inside their emergency departments?

Emergency physicians treat patients every day who have ingested synthetic drugs. They present with a variety of different symptoms associated with synthetic drug use, including chest pain, elevated blood pressure, nausea, erratic heartbeat, agitation, paranoia, muscle breakdown and /or hypothermia.

What is the government doing to protect people from synthetic drugs?

In July, 2012, President Obama signed into law (S.3187) legislation that will ban some chemicals that are currently, and legally, sold in the United States.^{vi} The law also extends the DEA’s authority to temporarily schedule controlled substances for up to 3 years. While it’s clear that more government intervention is needed — it is a significant step forward to combating this new, growing trend within the war on drugs.

ⁱ American Association of Poison Control Centers, 2012

<http://www.aapcc.org/dnn/NewsandEvents/NewsMediaResources.aspx>

ⁱⁱ White House Office of National Drug Control Policy: Synthetic Drugs, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/ondcp-factsheets/synthetic-drugs-k2-spice-bath-salts>

ⁱⁱⁱ American Association of Poison Control Centers, 2012

<http://www.aapcc.org/dnn/NewsandEvents/NewsMediaResources.aspx>

^{iv} National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2011 <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/khat>

^v “‘Bath Salts’ Abuse: What You Need to Know Part 1, April, 2012 <http://www.drugfree.org/join-together/addiction/%e2%80%9cbath-salts%e2%80%9d-abuse-what-you-need-to-know-part-i-2>

^{vi} S. 3187: Food and Drug Administration Safety and Innovation Act, 2012:

<http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/s3187/text>