

"Spice" and K2 vs. "Bath Salts": The Other Designer Drug Scare (www.forbes.com)



Danger sign: The brightly colored packets of Spice and K2 have all-ages appeal

The brewing controversy over the designer drug known as “bath salts” — which I covered in my [previous post](#) — is only the tip of the iceberg, say addiction specialists, who are seeing a sudden spike in overdoses and admissions for the designer drug known as Spice or K2 as well.

Just like “bath salts,” Spice/K2 contains recently synthesized chemicals. In this case they’re designed to mimic the active ingredient in marijuana, known as THC. And like “bath salts,” they’re widely sold in head shops and convenience stores, as well as online.

While Spice has been around a bit longer than bath salts — experts say it first appeared in the U.S. in 2004 — the word didn’t go out on the dangers of the drug until a couple of years ago. The problem being that most people assumed that, as a copy of marijuana, spice couldn’t be that worrisome.

But they were wrong.

Just what we need: A teen-friendly drug

Like bath salts, those whose lives are falling apart due to Spice are most likely to be teens and young adults. The problem, experts say, starts with pot, which has become so common among teens that marijuana abuse is now more common than cigarette smoking among high school seniors. More than 21 percent of high school students interviewed for a survey by the [Centers for Disease Control](#) reported abusing marijuana in the month prior, while only 19 percent reported smoking cigarettes in the same period of time.

Teens and twenty-somethings already fond of pot turn to Spice because it's easy to get, they perceive it as legal, and because schools and sports teams don't test for it. I mean if you can buy it at the local tobacconist, it must be cool, right? And it's easy to use; you just smoke it in a pipe or joint, and some people even brew it up in a tea.

What, exactly, is “Spice”?

Known by a variety of names including Zohai, Genie, K3, Bliss, Nice, Black Mamba, Incense, and even fake weed, Spice is a mixture of plant leaves and stems that have been laced with synthetic chemicals. It's sold in colorful three-ounce plastic pouches decorated with psychedelic designs. But the drug is not as fun and lighthearted as it appears. Experts point out that due to the variation in chemical additives used in Spice, K2, and other synthetics, users don't know exactly what they're getting in each packet and the effects can therefore be unpredictable.

When tested, Spice has been found to contain a number of artificial chemical compounds, primarily those known as JWH-018, JWH-073 and HU-210. None of these chemicals are guaranteed safe for human consumption, hence the warnings (meant to be ignored) on the packages. Technically a chemical fertilizer, JWH-18 can cause the negative effects of marijuana at much lower dosages, and JWH-073 is listed by the Drug Enforcement Administration as a chemical concern. Perhaps most worrisome: HU-210 has been found to be between 100 to 800 times more potent than THC, the main active chemical in marijuana.”

But the list of synthetic pseudo-cannabinoids keeps growing, as underground chemists create new variations to keep ahead of the law. At last count, there were at least 10 others, including M-694, CP-47,497, and numerous other variations of JWH.

It's not legal; as of last year, the Drug Enforcement Agency made 5 of the most common chemicals used to make Spice illegal and numerous states have passed laws making it a controlled substance and subject to fines and/or jail time for possession or distribution. But that's relatively recently, and meanwhile it remains absurdly easy to get your hands on. And while a new urine test for synthetic cannabinoids from [Redwood Toxicology](#), a division of Alere, has recently entered the market (as well as forensic tests by [NMS Labs](#) and others), many hospitals, emergency rooms, treatment centers and police departments don't yet have testing available to them.



A colorful counter display of K3 (image via prophoto2008)

What does a Spice high feel like?

Not good, according to what users tell therapists and reports turning up on addiction blogs. Unlike weed, which in general causes relaxation and positive feelings, Spice causes:

- acute anxiety or paranoia
- panic attacks
- a feeling of alienation/disassociation from the world
- hallucinations
- constant coughing
- feelings of nausea or actual vomiting
- inability to hold a thought for longer than a few seconds
- irregular heart beat/palpitations
- loss of concentration
- psychotic episodes
- tremors or seizures.

And Spice is now being blamed for numerous violent incidents and deaths, which so far have been reported primarily in local media. Here are a few of those sad stories:

In [Indiana](#), two men beat one man's father to death with a baseball bat when he interfered as they were robbing him to get money for Spice.

Also in [Indiana](#), a 17-year-old was shot by his grandmother when he became violent due to Spice.

In [Sioux City, Iowa](#), Spice triggered a panic attack in a teenager who then shot and killed himself.

A well-known [Anderson University](#) basketball player collapsed and died during a pre-season warmup after ingesting K2.

But the reporting of Spice-related deaths and violence has been hampered by lack of knowledge and the inability to test for the chemicals.

Is Spice addictive?

The answer to this is controversial, but addiction experts say yes. The problem is that typically we don't consider marijuana addictive, other than as a so-called gateway drug. (Though many addiction centers would disagree.) It's a different story with Spice, experts say.

“When I talked to my patients about Spice, every one of them would say the effects were extremely unpleasant and they wanted to stop,” says Brendan Bickley, Executive Director of Treatment Solutions Network in Costa Mesa, California. “But then they'd take it again. That was when I realized the addictiveness of the drug.”

According to addiction treatment centers across the country, counselors are seeing what some call an “epidemic” of Spice addiction, primarily among teens and young adults or long-term pot smokers. Spice causes intense cravings, and users must take more and more of it to get high, causing chemical dependency, say experts at Sovereign Health, one of the most prominent [addiction programs](#) treating Spice addiction. And, they say, people who've taken Spice exhibit often extreme agitation and paranoia.

Emergency rooms are seeing a spike in Spice overdoses, reports [Del Rey Treatment Center](#) in South Florida. And according to [Inspirations for Youth and Families](#), a teen addiction program also in Florida, the active ingredients in K2 remain stored in the body for long periods of time.

With all the mystery and misinformation swirling around Spice or K2, I'd love to hear from those on the front lines of this issue. Feel free to comment.