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'Fake pot' grows in popularity: Substance cathe... teens, state lawmakers

By Sara Ganim

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Different herbal smoke blends which have a warning label saying "not for human consumption". CDT/Nabil K. Mark CDT/NABIL K. MARK

STATE COLLEGE — It looks something like marijuana. People who smoke it say it feels something like it. For now, it's a completely legal alternative for that mellowed-out sensation many say they enjoy about pot.

But that all could soon change because synthetic marijuana, a mix of spices commonly known by a popular brand, K2, is gaining attention both from those who use it and from lawmakers who want to ban it.

The day before Thanksgiving, the federal Drug Enforcement Administration began a 30-day process that could lead to a blanket ban.

Ten states have so far outlawed this "fake pot." The state House of Representatives voted earlier this year to ban five blends, but the bill died at the end of the legislative session. It's expected to be reintroduced next year.

So as fast as it grew in popularity, K2, Spice, and other brands could be coming off the shelves of gas stations and head shops.

'A little off'

The stuff isn't new. It's the fad that's fresh.

Synthetic marijuana has been in head shops for years.

It was developed at Clemson University in the mid-1990s by a professor trying to replicate the positive

effects of the main active chemical in marijuana, THC, which is used by some to combat nausea and pain.

The professor ultimately scrapped the experiment when the bad side effects seemed to outweigh the positive.

But clandestine chemists got hold of the formula, which is made into an oily substance that's sprayed on junk weeds and grass to make it smokable.

It's sold under brand names — the most popular being Spice, K2, Wicked, and Mr. Nice Guy — and is marketed as an incense.

But most who buy it know it's a legal way to get high.

"I quit smoking weed, so I was like, hmm, this stuff's legal, I just walked into a Unimart and bought it," said an 18-year-old from Bellefonte, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "It was about the same as marijuana, it was just a little odd, like a little off."

After smoking it a handful of times, and trying many different brands, he said he's unsure about keeping it legal.

"Market it by potency," he said. "So you know what you're getting yourself into before you try it. The only time I've ever seen people have trouble with it ... was the brand Mr. Nice Guy. It's really intense. I wouldn't say you hallucinate, but your mind wanders enough that you think you do. I could close my eyes and see all my organs with little clocks on them counting down to when they expire."

Growing popularity

Last summer, when legislation to outlaw some forms of synthetic marijuana was making its way through the General Assembly, Centre County law enforcement officials said it hadn't been much of a problem here.

At that point, they'd encountered the mixtures only a few times — mostly in Penn State dorm rooms where they also found marijuana. That changed quickly.

By October, popularity seemed to be booming, and high schools were abuzz.

Eleven people in Centre County who had used it had been hospitalized after "bad trips."

Police officer Jason R. Brower, who works as the Bellefonte schools resource officer, said it's "extremely popular" among teenagers, and students who tried it have been pretty chatty about their experiences.

"They can buy it anywhere and I think that's what's made it so popular all of the sudden is the availability," he said.

Ferguson Township Sgt. Ryan Hendrick said police know of two car crashes that occurred in Centre County within a 12-week period that involved drivers who used synthetic marijuana.

"Specifically in Ferguson Township, we've had a pretty severe single vehicle crash on a straight roadway," Hendrick said.

Of the 11 or so incidents police have noted this fall, the two crashes stand out to law enforcement.

"People think that because it's not illegal to possess it's OK to use and drive on," said Trooper Derek Pacella, who has training in recognizing drug impairment. "But they forget that driving impaired is driving

impaired.”

It's like drinking gasoline, sniffing household cleaners, or downing a bottle of mouthwash and getting behind the wheel.

“Everyone thinks ‘I can smoke this, it's legal.’ No, you go out and crash your car, you drive goofy and we see you, we're going to arrest you,” Hendrick said.

Changing trends

K2 and similar mixtures are being sold openly in gas stations and head shops.

It's available in two stores downtown, Jamaica Junction and Dragonchasers Emporium, where customers are driving long distances — from as far as Pittsburgh — for a good selection.

“We do not have an accurate way to track where our sales come from,” said John O'Keefe, owner of the Dragonchasers Emporium. “We do get customers telling us they're from outside the area. I don't know what particularly they buy. We do try to be the best store in our category and it's my understanding that we have the best selection in several hundred miles.”

O'Keefe, who stumbled into owning his stores 20 years ago, operates four similar places in the state. They sell 200 kinds of incense under 40 to 50 brand names.

He's had his State College location for 15 years, and operates it from Frackville.

O'Keefe has allergies, and doesn't smoke, so he can't offer any first-hand experiences.

“There's always been some kind of trend,” he said. “I just try to find what my customers want and try to bring it into the store. I believe that there's certain ingredients that will be outlawed, and we will no longer carry a blend that contains those ingredients. There may be other blends that come along next and if customers like them, we'll continue to sell them.”

If the DEA outlaws the chemicals they are now investigating, O'Keefe said K2 will effectively be made illegal.

“We will, of course, no longer sell them once the ban is in effect,” he said. “We will continue to sell them until that time, but as patrons stock up before the ban, we may run out. I have already investigated, and ordered for our customers, new herbal incense blends that do not contain the banned chemicals.”

Bad reactions

In late November, after being flooded with reports from poison centers, emergency rooms and law enforcement, the DEA became concerned about the popularity of synthetic marijuana among teenagers and initiated a 30-day review period to decide if five of the most popular mixtures should be banned.

“Makers of these harmful products mislead their customers into thinking that ‘fake pot’ is a harmless alternative to illegal drugs,” Michele M. Leonhart, acting DEA chief said. “But that's not the case.”

The blends will remain legal until the review period is over and the DEA makes a decision. Since the 30-day period ends on Christmas Eve, word probably won't come until closer to next year, said DEA spokeswoman Barbara Carreno.

After the review, the DEA can make the substance temporarily illegal for a year, while it decides whether to classify it as a schedule 1 narcotic. That would put it in the same category as heroin and cocaine.

Pacella, the trooper who works daily with drug impairment, said synthetic marijuana seems to be more dangerous than old-fashioned pot.

"I don't think they know what they're getting," he said. And because the oily substance is sprayed onto leaves, smokers often get uneven doses.

"People that grow weed know what they're growing," Pacella said. "They know the potency of it. It's not THC that's impairing people, it's these other chemical compounds."

When people freak out on the stuff, he said, that's why.

"Most people say they tried it once and it was fine. It was the second time they had a bad trip," Pacella said. "Everybody's going to try it once or twice, but how long is it going to take before they say it's not worth it, this stuff sucks."

Even the pro-pot Drug Policy Alliance notes on its web-site that "... people who have tried K2 often report psychoactive effects that are comparable to marijuana, but notably less pleasurable."

Among the less pleasurable side effects is a 24-hour hangover, Pacella said.

The 18-year-old, who often smokes it with other 17-to 20- year-olds, said he's seen a lot of people react badly.

"I've seen a bunch of people panic and think they're dying," he said. "But you're honestly going to be all right. They just go nuts because they don't know how to control themselves in that state."

Brower, the Bellefonte police officer, was called when a 16-year-old reacted with a very high heart rate after smoking K2.

Another kid told him that the experience was terrifying.

"I definitely think it needs to go away," Brower added. "Somebody's going to get hurt, because they're not afraid of it and there's no repercussion legally. They're going to abuse it to the point that eventually somebody gets hurt."