

Synthetic Drugs: Know the facts

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You may have heard of laboratory-made synthetic drugs such as “bath salts” or synthetic marijuana, and as a parent or caregiver of a teen or young adult you might wonder what these substances are and the risks involved in their use. Here is important information for you to have in order to stay informed and up to date.

Synthetic drugs are chemical compounds created in laboratories and sold to replicate the effects of marijuana and other controlled substances. Concern about use of these drugs comes from their unpredictable and intense effects on the user, and from the varied concentration of chemicals from one product to the next. Much of what is known about the short and long-term effects of these substances on physical and psychological health comes from individual reports of use that crop up through emergency department visits, calls to poison control centers, and online forums. It is clear from the information collected on adverse reactions that synthetic drugs need to be a part of the substance use prevention conversation in Needham.

Teens and young adults in Massachusetts report use of two types of synthetic drugs: synthetic stimulants (“bath salts”) and synthetic cannabinoids (or synthetic marijuana, common street names include “K2,” or “Spice”) according to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) noted a substantial increase in calls to poison control centers for adverse reactions to synthetic cannabinoids in the same three-month study period during 2014 and 2015, which indicates that use of these drugs may be on the rise.

Synthetic marijuana is a chemical that is sprayed onto plant material and sold in order to be smoked. It is also manufactured as a liquid to be vaporized and used in e-cigarettes. In order to mimic the high of marijuana, the chemical product in synthetic cannabinoids operates on the same brain cell receptors. Reported adverse effects of synthetic marijuana include, rapid heart rate, vomiting, violent behavior, suicidal thoughts, raised blood pressure, kidney damage, and seizures, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA).

Synthetic stimulants (synthetic cathinones or “bath salts”) have an effect on individuals similar to cocaine and hallucinogenic drugs, such as LSD, MDMA, and/or methamphetamine. Despite their name, these are not the type of bath salts that are added to bathwater. Rather, the name “bath salts” is used to avoid detection by law enforcement or public health officials. Bath salts usually take the form of a crystalline powder and are typically swallowed, snorted, smoked, or injected. Reports of adverse effects of synthetic stimulants include paranoia, hallucinations, extreme agitation, and panic attacks.

Synthetic drugs are commonly available for purchase at gas stations, convenience stores, drug paraphernalia shops, and through the internet. They are primarily marketed to young adults and teens with brightly colored foil packages, cartoon characters, and are sold under a variety of street names, such as Joker, Black Mamba, Kush, and Kronic. Though some versions of synthetic drugs are covered under the federal controlled substances act, new chemical compounds continue to be created as a work around to current bans, according to the CDC and NIDA. Efforts to keep new varieties off the market include local and federal legislation that ban these look-alike drugs, according to a study published in *Governing* magazine.

Initial inspections conducted by the Needham Police Department have not revealed any vendor that currently sells synthetic drugs in Needham, and if the Board of Health enacts its synthetic drug regulation at a public hearing it will soon be unlawful to sell any such products in Needham.

The documented adverse effects of synthetic drugs are cause for concern; they are unpredictable, intense, and in some instances include death. These outcomes, along with the ever-changing landscape of synthetic drugs, illustrate the need to equip ourselves with knowledge and a way to communicate the risks to the young people in our lives. The Town of Needham will continue to take active steps to address this trend in synthetic drug use and we invite you to be a part of this effort by educating yourself and others about this issue. You can find more information on our website by visiting www.needhamma.gov/health.

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