



Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services

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TO: Addiction Treatment Providers, Health Care Professionals, and School Health Professionals

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Health Advisory:

Synthetic Cannabinoids: Increase in Adverse Events and Emergency Department Visits

Please distribute immediately to: Addiction Treatment Providers, Health Care Professionals, and School Health Professionals

SUMMARY

- The New York State Department of Health has been informed of a recent increase in synthetic cannabinoid-related adverse events and emergency department visits during this month, with over 160 individuals visiting health care facilities since April 8th. During the first few months of 2015, an average of two to three synthetic-marijuana related emergency department visits occurred each day.
- Reported cases were mostly in New York City and Syracuse. The New York City cases were predominately in East Harlem, with smaller increases also noted among residents of Upper Manhattan, and Central Brooklyn.
- Healthcare providers should consider synthetic cannabinoid use when evaluating patients who have compatible signs and symptoms.
- Synthetic cannabinoids are not targeted in standard urine toxicology screens; therefore, synthetic cannabinoid exposure should not be ruled out based on negative screening results. Consult your laboratory for preferred testing methods.
- Health care providers should **call the Poison Control Center (PCC) (1-800-222-1222)** for guidance on the management of these patients and to report adverse events associated with these substances.

CLINICAL INFORMATION

Synthetic cannabinoids are man-made drugs that are marketed as "legal" and typically consist of plant material coated by chemicals which mimic THC, the active principle of marijuana. The products are sold as incense, herbal mixtures or potpourri, online and in convenience or smoke shops, and often carry a "not for human consumption" label in order to disguise the true purpose of the substance.

Although commonly referred to as "synthetic marijuana," these substances are often not made using marijuana and can have effects that are much more profound than marijuana, especially on brain function. In fact, some think that the term "synthetic marijuana" can lead users to a false sense of safety when they expect that effects will be similar to those of marijuana. Synthetics actually comprise a variety of agents whose chemical structures vary and may be changed frequently by manufacturers.

Synthetic cannabinoids are often referred to by different names, including: K2, Spice, Blonde, Summit, Standard, Blaze, Red Dawn X, Citron, Green Giant, Smacked, Wicked X, AK-47, synthetic marijuana, or legal marijuana. Additional names include: Geeked up, Ninja, Caution, Red Giant or Keisha Kole.

Healthcare providers should consider synthetic cannabinoids when evaluating patients who have compatible signs and symptoms. Signs and symptoms of synthetic cannabinoid use include: agitation, anxiety, nausea, vomiting, high blood pressure, tremor, seizures, hallucinations, paranoia, and violent behavior. These effects can be similar to those of phencyclidine (PCP). It has been reported that several recent patients are also presenting with somnolence and bradycardia, some requiring endotracheal intubation. These effects can appear similar to those of clonidine.

Since the exact compounds contained in synthetic cannabinoid products change frequently, risks and adverse consequences are unpredictable. No antidote is presently available for synthetic cannabinoid intoxication; however, symptoms are usually short-lived and self-limited.

Since many of these symptoms are similar to symptoms of psychosis or other psychiatric illnesses, patients may be admitted for psychiatric evaluation. However, addiction medicine professionals should be consulted to ensure patients are referred for appropriate assessment and/or treatment if necessary.

After stabilization, Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) can be a useful tool to delineate those patients who should be referred for treatment and those who may respond to a brief intervention and warning.

LEGAL INFORMATION

- It is illegal in New York State to possess, sell, offer to sell, or manufacture synthetic cannabinoids.¹ Continuing or repeat violation may result in closure of the retail establishment.
- In August 2012, the New York State Department of Health, at the Governor's urging, issued regulations banning the sale and possession of dozens of substances used to make synthetic cannabinoids and bath salts. The regulations also allowed an owner of an establishment and/or an employee selling synthetic drugs to be charged with possession of an illicit substance, which is punishable with a fine up to \$500, or 15 days in jail, or a civil penalty of up to \$2,000 per violation.

ACTION STEPS:

Health care providers are required to report suspect or confirmed cases of poisoning (including overdose) by drugs or other toxic agents within 24 hours to the **Poison Control Center at 1-800-222-1222 or 212-764-7667 (POISONS)**. These reports are critical in detecting and preventing overdose outbreaks. Call the PCC for clinical guidance and to report adverse events associated with synthetic cannabinoids.

Statewide individuals who are aware of locations where these synthetic drugs are being sold or distributed should call **1-888-99-SALTS (1-888-997-2587)**. The New York City Health Department urges New Yorkers who see synthetic cannabinoids for sale to report this to **311**.

Educate your patients about the undesirable effects of synthetic cannabinoids and their illegal status. Educational posters and information are available at nyc.gov/health (search "synthetic marijuana"). View the New York State Department of Health's Healthcare Provider Letter on synthetic cannabinoids [here](#).

Refer patients to [certified addiction treatment providers](#) at this link: http://www.oasas.ny.gov/providerDirectory/index.cfm?search_type=2. Referrals for treatment are also available by calling the **New York State's HOPEline at 1-877-846-7369** or **New York City's 1-800-LIFENET** hotline.

¹Public Health Law Section 225, Title 10, Part 9 states "It shall be unlawful for any individual or entity to possess, manufacture, distribute, sell or offer to sell any synthetic phenethylamine or synthetic cannabinoid or product containing the same"