



NEW YORK CITY DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
AND MENTAL HYGIENE
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Commissioner

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DOHMH WARNS NEW YORKERS OF DANGERS OF “SYNTHETIC MARIJUANA” AFTER INCREASE IN EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT VISITS

Between April 8 and April 15, more than 120 emergency department visits related to “synthetic marijuana” were detected by DOHMH

April 17, 2015 – The Health Department today warned New Yorkers not to use synthetic cannabinoids – most commonly referred to as “synthetic marijuana” – after a significant increase in emergency department visits. Between April 8 and April 15, more than 120 emergency department visits related to synthetic cannabinoids were detected by the Health Department. During the first few months of 2015, an average of two to three synthetic-marijuana related emergency department visits occurred each day.

The majority of cases are in East Harlem. The median age of cases is 35 years old, and almost 90 percent of cases are male. In response to this troubling increase in emergency department visits, the Health Department will issue Commissioner’s Orders to stores in East Harlem and surrounding areas to remind owners that it is illegal to sell synthetic cannabinoids in New York City.



“Despite what the package might say, there’s no way of knowing exactly what synthetic marijuana contains,” said Health Commissioner Dr. Mary T. Bassett. “The consequences of using synthetic marijuana are unpredictable and I urge people not to use these dangerous and illegal drugs.”

Synthetic cannabinoids refers to the many herbal mixtures inaccurately believed to be safe. Synthetic cannabinoids are known by several street names, including K2, Spice, Green Giant, Red Giant, Geeked Up, Caution, Smacked, Wicked X, AK-47 and “legal marijuana.” The packages can also be labeled “not for human consumption” and sold as “incense” or “potpourri.” The products contain dried, shredded plant material onto which chemicals are sprayed. Smoking the substance creates dangerous, mind-altering effects. People can buy synthetic cannabinoids in head shops, convenience stores, and on the Internet.

“Synthetic marijuana is a blight on our City and of particular concern in East Harlem where it is too often sold,” said Council Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito. “The Department of Health has been an excellent partner in helping my district office get the word out to East Harlem about the hazardous effects of this product. I urge all New Yorkers to stay safe and avoid these dangerous products by avoiding the use of any of these synthetic products.”

“After an alarming increase of hospitalizations in New York City due to the consumption of synthetic marijuana, or K2, it is absolutely imperative that New Yorkers know the dangers of using such cannabinoids,” said Council Member Corey Johnson, Chair of the Health Committee. “Though believed by many to be safe, these products are actually shredded plant material – that no one really knows the origin of – that have been sprayed with harmful chemicals. If smoked, it is these chemicals that can create extremely harmful effects including anxiety, sedation, rapid heart rate, vomiting and seizures.” Cannabinoids can even cause kidney failure or in the most extreme cases, heart attacks. I commend the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene for swiftly taking action to warn New Yorkers of these risks.”

Some synthetic cannabinoid users develop extreme anxiety, confusion, sedation, paranoia and hallucinations. Other reported effects include rapid heart rate, vomiting, seizures and fainting. Synthetic cannabinoids can also cause kidney failure, raise blood pressure and reduce blood supply to the heart. In a few cases, it has been associated with heart attacks. Heavy users may also experience withdrawal and craving.

The Health Department urges New Yorkers who see synthetic cannabinoids for sale to report this to 311. The Health Department will work with other City agencies to investigate these reports.

For more information about the dangers of synthetic cannabinoids, visit nyc.gov.

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