

Dangerous new designer drugs are showing up in Alaska

'BATH SALTS': Side effects can include seizures, paranoia, death.

By ROSEMARY SHINOHARA

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A year after Anchorage led the state in outlawing a new street drug known as Spice, K2 or Spike, another set of new so-called "designer" drugs that are at least as dangerous is appearing in Alaska, a city prosecutor says.

The Spice-type drugs are synthetic marijuana.

The new drugs are chemical stimulants that mimic the effects of cocaine, ecstasy and methamphetamine, and are peddled under names like Pure Ivory, White Rush and Synergy.

The drugs are sometimes sold under the guise of "bath salts" or "plant food." Ingesting the powders and crystals causes side effects such as delusions, seizures, teeth grinding, paranoia, heart palpitations, blue extremities and, in some cases, death, assistant city prosecutor Jennifer Messick told Anchorage Assembly members at a work session earlier this month.

The Assembly last week made it illegal to sell, use or possess the chemical compounds found in the "bath salt" group of drugs in Anchorage. The federal Drug Enforcement Administration in October added the ingredients of the synthetic drugs to a list of controlled substances that are illegal to sell or possess in the United States.

Sen. Kevin Meyer, R-Anchorage, is planning to introduce a proposed state law banning the chemicals used in bath salts too.

A state law will help because the federal government "may not prosecute many of the lower-level cases that we and the state can," said Anchorage city attorney Dennis Wheeler.

But no one thinks these laws will totally erase the threat. The new rules are difficult to enforce and fresh versions of designer drugs can appear at any time.

"In just over a year, we went from five compounds in Spice to 400-something substances out there as of July," Messick said.

ARE THE DRUGS HERE?

So what's the evidence that the bath salt drugs -- synthetic stimulants Mephedrone, Methylone and a third known as MDPV -- are actually in Alaska?

Providence Alaska Medical Center psychiatric nurse practitioner Heather Brock said this year she's seen about one person a month who is sick enough from the bath salt family of drugs to be admitted to the hospital. They've either told her what they've taken or they've brought in the package, she said.

Other users may have just been seen in the emergency room.

Dr. Jeff Baurick, who works in the emergency room at Alaska Regional Hospital, said he's had one bath salt case in the past few months and has heard of a few other patients seen by one of the nine other ER doctors there.

People snort or swallow the drugs or even put them up their rectums, Brock said.

"People are confused, agitated, they have increased heart rates, a couple cases of arrhythmia," she said. "They're very paranoid, like you would see in any kind of stimulant."

The effects only last a few hours, she said. That leads to another problem.

"Because they're fast-on, fast-off, people are more likely to re-dose, which makes it more likely to overdose," Brock said.

There's no antidote, she said. Medical providers simply treat the symptoms: "You address the heart rate, the fever, the anxiety."

In at least one case, a person mixed a bath salt drug with cocaine, causing a bad reaction, she said. She couldn't be more specific due to privacy rules.

Messick said the drugs are appearing locally "quite a bit."

She said between Anchorage police and Valley emergency and law enforcement officials, reports are made just about daily that they're dealing with people showing the symptoms of having used the bath salt compounds.

In her talks in Anchorage schools, Messick has found students are aware of the new variety of drugs. But earlier this month, a School District spokeswoman said the district has had no incidents involving students.

"We may be getting on the front end of it," Anchorage Police Chief Mark Mew said. "We're looking at a situation where the evidence is anecdotal."

WHERE TO GET THEM

Bath salts are accessible through the Internet and are believed to have been available in some tobacco shops, Messick said. When she visited a couple of tobacco shops in East Anchorage after the feds made bath salts illegal last month, though, the store representatives said they didn't have any.

"We could go to jail," one of them told her.

But both shops offered packets of material called Spice, she said. The packets could have been synthetic marijuana, which both the municipality and the state made illegal over the past year.

The fact that Spice is still on the shelves illustrates another problem: enforcement.

Whether stores that are still offering items marketed as Spice are breaking the law is "open for debate," Messick said.

The ingredients on so-called Spice packets aren't listed and it's unclear if they contain the specific ingredients banned under state or city law.

The city law "casts a wide net if you market anything with the same effect," Messick said. "I think the concern is whether it's vague and overbroad."

Another enforcement issue: The city doesn't have a field test kit for either the synthetic marijuana drugs or the latest, so-called bath salt drugs, Chief Mew said. A field test would give officers probable cause to arrest someone for use of the drugs.

Users could still be arrested for driving under the influence under a city law that makes it illegal to drive if a person is impaired by any substance, Messick said.

And test kits might become available before long. Messick said a company in the Netherlands is producing them.

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