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POLITICS

BLOGS

ARCTIC

CULTURE

MULTIMEDIA

PROJECTS

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Designer drugs like 'plant food' and 'bath salts' exploding across Alaska

Victoria Barber and Noah Hull Diamond | The Seward Journal | Nov 07, 2011



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In towns both large and small throughout Alaska a new class of potent designer drugs has established a foothold, sending more and more users to hospital emergency rooms while police wonder how to fight back.

Mephedrone, methylone and MDPV -- drugs commonly known as "plant food," "bath salts" and "air freshener" -- are legal under state law.

While the street names sound benign, the drugs' effects are anything but. The powerful drugs are easy to get and relatively cheap. The three drugs are marketed interchangeably and sometimes referred to as "synthetic cocaine." They are all powerful central nervous system stimulants, designed to mimic the effects of illegal drugs like meth, cocaine and ecstasy -- with some hallucinogenic properties as well.

"We're seeing a psychoactive substance that seems to be more intense than any of the stimulants -- more intense and more robust in some cases than meth, and definitely cocaine and ecstasy," said Patrick Hayes, supervisor of the outpatient substance abuse program at SeaView Community Services in Seward.

The drugs are relatively inexpensive, in part because they have been easy to get. Bath salts and plant food can be found easily on the Internet, where they are marketed under names like "Vanilla Sky," "Ivory Wave," and "Red Dove." They can come in almost banal-looking packages (bath salts are often emblazoned with images of flower petals, angels, birds and women's feet) and marked with a disclaimer that they're not for human consumption.

The drugs have also gained a following as something that won't show up on urinalysis tests. Until recently the compounds were legal -- the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration temporarily banned the substances just last month, but the state of Alaska has yet to address the issue legally.

Hayes said that he first heard about plant food in Seward several years ago. During the last two years, he said, it seems to have caught on.

"It seemed like the people who were moving from cocaine to meth eventually starting moving on to it," Hayes said. "I think that meth is being replaced by plant food."

Effects mimic a schizophrenic breakdown

"I used, what you're calling plant food, for the first time about a year or so ago," said "Sam," a Seward resident in his early 30s who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

Sam sat down to talk at a local restaurant on a chilly evening this fall. He grew up with nice parents in a middle-class family, he said, but fell into substance abuse. It started in his teens with cigarettes and marijuana and progressed to hallucinogens, prescription drugs and cocaine.

Today, Sam is usually homeless. He said he turns to plant food as an alternative to spendier, harder-to-find drugs like heroin. "It's pretty cheap, and you get high for a while," Sam said.

Plant food, bath salts and air freshener can be ingested in a variety of ways. They come in powder or pill form and can be snorted, freebased, mixed with water and injected or atomized.

But while the drugs' effects mimic substances like cocaine or ecstasy, there isn't a lot of information about how mephedrone, methylone and MDPV affect the human body, even as users are landing in hospital emergency rooms.

"It's so new, we don't even know the half life (how long it takes the liver to detoxify half of the drug)," Hayes said. "We don't know long-term effects of chronic use. We're seeing people using it, showing up at the ER with symptoms of psychosis, rapid heart-beat, elevated heart pressure, along with delusional thinking and hallucinations, both auditory and visual."

The hallucinations described by users, Hayes said, are "more along the lines of someone who is experiencing a schizophrenic breakdown."

"I've talked to people who've used plant food -- they say it's the worst acid trip they've been on -- but as soon as they come down they want more."

'Absolutely' dangerous

"There may be users that say they've never had a bad trip. That may be," said Jennifer Messick, a traffic safety resource prosecutor with the Municipality of Anchorage who works with the Anchorage Police Department. Those aren't the users that law enforcement ends up dealing with, she said. "We find many users who say they thought it was safe -- a safe alternative to cocaine, meth or whatever, and land in the hospital."

Messick began researching designer drugs a couple years ago. As her expertise has grown, she's been inundated with requests to visit communities around the state and nation to talk with police officers about designer drugs and how to safely handle people who are on them.

Messick said users on mephedrone tend to be paranoid and delusional. They commonly report a sense of impending death or doom, seeing hallucinations of dead people.

Some drug users enter a state of "excited delirium" -- a condition often associated with cocaine or meth -- where they become extremely aggressive, temporarily insensitive to pain and display incredible strength and endurance. This poses "a huge safety risk for officers," Messick said.

It's becoming a bigger problem because use of plant food, bath salts and their kind is increasing "exponentially" across the state, Messick said. It's hit the Mat-Su Valley and Anchorage hard, but small towns have not been spared either. "I can assure you it's about everywhere in Alaska, even some of the villages," Messick said.

Messick said mephedrone, methylone and MDPV started out as party drugs in Russia and Western Europe. They have since been banned in many European nations, including the United Kingdom, but their popularity spread overseas to the U.S. on the heels of synthetic cannabinoids like "spice" and "K2."

Plant food and bath salt use appears to have exploded in the last couple years. Nationwide, there were a total of 298 calls to the American Association of Poison Control Centers about plant food in 2010. In just the first half of 2011 that number jumped to 4,137 - a 1,400 percent increase. That doesn't even include 911 calls, Messick noted.

"Unfortunately, the general public doesn't understand how absolutely dangerous these things are," Messick said.

Families on alert

"I can say I was shocked when I heard (plant food) was in Seward," said Karen Sturdy, director of the Seward Parks and Recreation Department.

Sturdy said she first heard the drug was being used in Seward last year. In a presentation before City Council, she said plant food was one of the dangers facing Seward's youth. "I think it's way more prevalent than anyone is willing to admit," said Sturdy.

The drugs are scary on their own, Sturdy said, but she's also worried that youth, upon hearing the street names, will try to snort or otherwise ingest real plant food or bath salts, thinking it will get them high. "There are kids in Seward who think they are 10 feet tall and bullet proof," Sturdy said. "So, it's frightening."

Lt. Louis Tiner said Seward police are coming into contact with more and more people who are on plant food and bath salts or admit to using them. "But more than anything we hear from concerned people about their friends and family members," Tiner said. "There are people using it and addicted to it and there are people here distributing it. It is something parents should be aware of and on the lookout for."

Illegal, and not illegal

Last month, mephedrone, methylone and MDPV became illegal under federal law. The DEA took emergency action Oct. 21 to control the substances, making the possession and sale of the

chemicals, or products containing them, illegal in the United States. It's a temporary action that will be in effect for a year while the DEA and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services study whether the drugs should be permanently controlled.

Until then, police have few tools with which to battle the use of mephedrone, methylone and MDPV. That's because while the drugs are banned under federal law, the State of Alaska has yet to take action on them. If a police officer in Seward came across someone in possession or selling plant food they could only pass the case along to the DEA for review. While the DEA could prosecute, there's also a chance they wouldn't take action on small-scale, individual cases. "There's a great need for state and local legislation," said Messick.

Anchorage Mayor Dan Sullivan introduced an ordinance last month to criminalize plant food, bath salts and the others. And state Sen. Kevin Meyer announced his intent to introduce legislation in the upcoming session to ban mephedrone and MDPV at the state level.

"What makes these substances even more dangerous is how they are being marketed . . . With names like 'Meow-Meow,' Vanilla Sky,' 'Ivory Snow' and 'Bliss', (they're) obviously aimed at kids and young adults," Meyer said in a press release.

Messick acknowledged the laws may be insufficient. Designer drugs are carefully designed to get around the law. "I tell people to think not just about these drugs, but what drug will come out next year," Messick said. The most important thing to do, he said, is to make sure people know the risks. That can help -- although some people don't care.

"Some chemist will just change the formula a little then it'll be cheap and easy again," said Sam. "I want to get high and if they make it illegal, I still will."

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