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Sports

Frightening new drug becoming concern in athletics

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By The Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — The company that does drug testing for the NFL, NCAA and more than 100 U.S. schools is coming up with a way to detect a troubling new synthetic substance that mimics the effects of marijuana and is so far legal in 49 states.

The lab-made drug known as K2, King Krypto and Spice, among other names, is well known in Europe and authorities say it's been banned in countries including Germany, Russia, Sweden and England.

It began showing up in the United States only about six months ago, federal authorities say, and Kansas outlawed it in March. A ban at the federal level could take months, if not years.

The NCAA declined to comment on the drug, but the agency it pays to conduct drug testing is already working on a test to detect K2 use after hearing from a number of schools concerned about it.

By this fall, the National Center for Drug Free Sport Inc. hopes to have a test ready to go for college athletes, many of whom may be especially tempted by the drug.

"What you see with college kids is they're young and they think they're invincible," said Barbara Carreno, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency. "They don't have a sense of their own mortality yet. And with this, they're not going to get thrown in jail. It's got a lot of appeal."

The NCAA bans a broad swath of substances, including marijuana, and anything "chemically related" to those substances whether they are performance enhancers or recreational drugs.

Drug Free Sport contracts with the NFL, NCAA, several athletic conferences and schools to administer more than 20,000 drug tests annually. Athletes are tested at NCAA championships and randomly throughout the academic year, and Drug Free Sport tests athletes who fall under suspicion by coaches or trainers.

"We started receiving phone calls about K2 after the first of the year from a few schools," said Frank Uryasz, president of the Kansas City-based company. "They were concerned that they were hearing athletes talk about K2."

Uryasz is confident K2 will eventually be banned in college athletics and Carreno is equally certain states will outlaw it.

But so far, Kansas lawmakers are alone in taking action.

"We found out about it in October," said Jeremy Morris, a senior forensics scientist at the Johnson County, Kan., criminal investigation laboratory. "And by March, the governor signs the bill and we have it controlled. Kids were getting sick, going to the hospital, and we couldn't stop it. But now we can."

Officials interviewed for this story were not aware of any deaths resulting from the use of K2. But many expressed concern about the drug's effects.

"It's rather frightening," said Dr. Anthony Scalzo, director of the Missouri Regional Poison Control Center in St. Louis and a consultant in cases of suspected K2 use around the country.

"We've had people come in with dreadful symptoms. They're agitated. Their heart's racing. Their blood pressure is up," Scalzo said. "They feel terrible. Some are even paranoid and having hallucinations. And the tests come back negative, even for marijuana. So doctors wind up scratching their heads and wondering what's going on here.

"I've also had patients say, 'Hey, Doc, I know you're trying to do your best on this, but I had some K2 and let me tell you, I felt perfectly fine.'"

Like the NCAA, the Big Ten Conference declined to comment when asked about the new drug. Ed Stewart, an assistant commissioner of the Big 12, said he had not heard of it.

But calls and e-mails about K2 have begun coming into Drug Free Sport's Resource and Exchange Center, a service that answers questions from anonymous athletes, trainers, or anyone connected with college sports.

"They were all anonymous, so we don't know where they came from or who they came from, or if they were using it or just trying to learn more about it," said Dan Regan, a staff member at Drug Free Sport. "But there have been inquiries."

K2, in whatever form, is available for roughly the same price as marijuana and it can be purchased over the counter. Steve Vogt can hardly keep the stuff in stock at Weedz, a shop he owns near the Las Vegas Strip.

"You can make \$7,000 a day if you've got a busy shop," Vogt said in a telephone interview. "I don't think I want to say exactly how much. But I'm going through a lot. All I do is keep buying more. More and more people are hearing about it. More and more people are buying it."

The DEA said the drug is made primarily abroad, in Europe and China, and Scalzo said K2 was developed in laboratory experiments in the mid-90s as scientists sought ways to restore the appetite of emaciated chemotherapy patients.

"I think we can make a pretty good guess that somebody was doing some research on synthetic cannabinoids and came across this paper and realized that was something that could be a pretty good drug," said Morris, the Kansas forensics expert.

A perfected test would be cheered by the DEA.

"God bless them and good luck," said Carreno, the agency spokeswoman. "It's not difficult to make a test, but there are so many different chemicals to test for to be comprehensive. You might be testing for HU-210 and your athletes are using JWH-018. Or JWH-173. There's a number of these chemicals and you have to test for all of them to know that you're catching them all."

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