

Army punishes 36 for using synthetic pot

SPICE AND K2: U.S. Army Alaska banned head shop product in August.

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The U.S. Army Alaska says it has punished 36 soldiers for the use of synthetic marijuana since it banned the substance.

Seven soldiers were tried at courts-martial, and 29 received nonjudicial punishments, the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner reported.

Synthetic marijuana is known as Spice or K2. It's a blend of spices and herbs sprayed with a compound similar to the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana. It's commonly sold in head shops.

Some users think the substance can't be detected in drugs tests. But the Army says its urine tests can now find the chemicals used in Spice.

In March, a 25-year-old Fort Richardson soldier just back from Iraq was convicted of driving under the influence of Spice. He was arrested after driving his Chevrolet Avalanche over three raised medians, into a concrete wall and down a sidewalk with flat tires and a broken axle.

The U.S. Army Alaska banned Spice in August.

It had seen an increase in users with high blood pressure and heart rates admitted to hospitals at Fort Richardson in Anchorage and Fort Wainwright in Fairbanks.

The soldiers have had life-threatening reactions in some cases, the commander of U.S. Army Alaska, Brig. Gen. Raymond Palumbo, wrote in a commentary published in the Fort Richardson and Fort Wainwright newspapers.

"We have no idea what the long-term effects are since the chemicals vary and have not been fully tested," Palumbo wrote. "But we do know that in the short term, bad things happen when people use Spice."

This month, the Anchorage Assembly voted unanimously to make the chemicals illegal in the city as of Jan. 6. It will be a misdemeanor to sell, make, have or use products containing cannabinoids, which are versions of the active ingredients in marijuana. The products are found in convenience stores and tobacco shops in parts of the country where they're not illegal.

In October, state Sen. Kevin Meyer, R-Anchorage, proposed a bill to outlaw Spice after state troopers arrested a Fairbanks man who used the substance, broke into a house, stripped naked and slept in the homeowners' bed. He told troopers God had told him to do so.

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency has started a process to outlaw five chemicals commonly used in synthetic marijuana.