Synthetic Drugs: Unstable & Dangerous

FACT SHEET

What are synthetic drugs?

Synthetic drugs and/or designer drugs are non-organic, chemically altered substances that began emerging in the United States around the 1970s. Most all of the synthetic drugs are made with the intention to mimic the effects of pre-existing banned controlled substances. The intent may be to produce similar effects but due to the altered design, one cannot be sure as to what the outcome of using synthetic drugs will be. Due to their altered design such drugs are hard to track and are constantly changing in an attempt to bypass United States drug laws.

Bath salts, K2, Ecstasy, PCP and LSD are all examples of synthetic drugs. Their ingredients and potency vary, as they are created in illegal, uncontrolled laboratories. The resulting synthetic drugs, due to their altered chemical makeup, pose a severe threat to all who use these drugs. Although synthetic drugs have been around for some time (LSD and Ecstasy for example) recent media attention has focused on newer synthetic drugs, such as bath salts and K2, that have resulted in a surge in cases in emergency rooms and poison control centers.

These newer chemicals were never intended for human consumption. Due to that fact, extensive testing has not been done to assess how these drugs impact the human body. The information that has been collected has come mostly from poison control centers, law enforcement and public health authorities.

What do synthetic drugs look like?

Let’s focus on the two most current and prominent synthetic drugs-bath salts and K2. Bath salts consist of crystallized powder typically sold in small baggies or containers. The containers are often marked with the phrase, “Not for human consumption”. Bath salts are typically crushed and then smoked, snorted, injected, or ingested.

K2 products are typically sold in small, silvery plastic bags. The bags consist of dried leaves with varying colors depending on the blend. K2 is commonly mixed with dried herbs, flowers and tobacco then covered with a synthetic compound intended to give a high similar to marijuana. The chemical compound used to make K2 is said to be 3 to 5 times more potent than delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). The mix is sold in 3-ounce packages. K2 is most commonly smoked.

Where can synthetic drugs be found?

The United States Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) reports that synthetic drugs can be acquired over the internet and on the street in “head shops”, tobacco shops, convenience stores, gas stations and truck stops. The internet has played a significant role in the explosion of synthetic drug use due to the ease of purchase and the difficulty in tracking such operations.

Why are synthetic drugs being used?

Although no one population is excluded from the use of synthetic drugs, it is becoming increasingly popular with today’s youth. According to a recent study done by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), one in nine high school seniors have used K2 in the past year. That means that synthetic marijuana now ranks as the second most frequently used illegal drug among high school seniors, after marijuana. The DEA believes this attraction comes from the idea that many teens believe synthetic drugs to be “safer” because until very recently they were not classified as illegal. Others may use synthetics because such drugs are hard to detect in urine screens.

Has there been reported synthetic drug use in Berks County?

Synthetic drugs are being sold on the streets as well as in some of our local convenience stores. In late February, 2012 Berks County Detectives seized more than $500,000 worth of synthetic drugs and paraphernalia from a local Reading business. Local police have noted an increase in incidents related to synthetic drugs. Drug and alcohol treatment centers are also seeing evidence of this new user and are looking to develop appropriate treatment protocol.
FACT SHEET (cont.)

Are synthetic drugs illegal?

The Drug Enforcement Administration took emergency action in October of 2011 to ban dozens of synthetic analogs which are used in the creation of synthetic drugs such as bath salts and K2. This emergency measure places those substances under the DEA’s most restrictive category for at least a year. In late February, 2012 the DEA announced that the temporary scheduling action will now remain in effect for an additional six months while the permanent scheduling process of synthetic drugs is underway. These chemicals will continue to be designated as Schedule I substances, the most restrictive category under the Controlled Substances Act.

In 2011, Governor Tom Corbett signed into law legislation that bans the possession, use and sale of synthetic designer drugs. Under this law conviction for a first offense for delivery or possession with the intent to deliver carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a $15,000 fine. Other states as well as neighboring countries are taking the same approach.

What happens with synthetic drug use? – What has been reported?

Not all synthetic drugs are created with the same chemical structure; the intensity of the drug will also vary depending on who is producing it. However, there are some general consistencies that have been reported. Bath salts users seek a more social and interactive feeling. However, hallucinations and profound paranoia have shown up consistently with these users. Bath salts are known to produce side effects such as elevated heart rate, hypertension, suicidal tendencies, aggressive and violent behavior, irritability and delusions of super-human strength. Along with these side effects, there are also reports around the United States of people committing violent acts while under the influence. Numerous fatalities and cases of violent suicide have been reported to poison control authorities. Due to the altered chemicals in bath salts, standard hospital treatment does not work effectively for overdose situations. Long-term side effects are yet to be determined.

Pale skin, elevated blood pressure and heart beat, vomiting and hallucinations are all side effects associated with K2. K2 is also believed to adversely affect the cardiovascular and central nervous system. Long-term impact is unknown.

What should someone do if synthetic drug use is suspected?

If you suspect that someone you know is using synthetic drugs it is crucial to seek help immediately. Due to the side effects, confronting the potential user may pose a threat. Assess the situation with safety in mind and then confer with professional help as soon as possible. Be sure to use available drug and alcohol, mental health and/or other emergency resources within Berks County; they will be able to assist and provide options. A 24-hour hotline is available at 610-988-8186.

Why is it so important to educate the community about synthetic drugs?

Synthetic drugs are a growing problem not only within our community but across the nation. In order to successfully address such a widespread issue the community must be informed. Raising awareness and educating the public is crucial in putting a stop to the synthetic drug epidemic.

Report Berks County retailers selling synthetic drugs:

Berks County District Attorney’s Office
610-478-7171
Berks County Crime Alert
1-877-373-9913

Criminal Justice Advisory Board

Synthetic Drugs: Unstable & Dangerous Supporting Partners:

[Logos of Council on Chemical Abuse, Berks County District Attorney’s Office, and Berks County Mental Health Developmental Disabilities HealthChoices Program]