

Synthetic Drugs – Authentic Danger

While the threats posed by illegal drugs are dangerous enough, they are not the only substance abuse concern for parents. Along with legal prescription drugs, synthetic drugs (or “Legal Highs”) are often mistakenly viewed by teens as safe because they are not prohibited by law. These dangerous products appear on gas station cash counters and in head shops around the country, giving the impression that they are legal, danger-free alternatives to better-known drugs like marijuana, LSD, and other psychoactives. National, state, and local law enforcement agencies are scrambling to devise an effective response strategy to these products, but in the meantime it’s up to parents to educate themselves and their children about synthetic drugs. It could save your child’s life.

What are Synthetic Drugs?

Psychoactive drugs contain chemicals that travel through the bloodstream to the brain, triggering forms of hallucinations such as false smells and tastes, moods, and other forms of altered consciousness. Unscrupulous companies looking for a way to cash in on the addiction of drug users without technically breaking the law discovered ways to artificially combine, or “synthesize,” chemicals that would have the same effects as illegal drugs. Oddly enough, in some ways these synthetic creations are more dangerous than the drugs they copy, since there is little to no information on their potential dangers. In one case, users of a newly designed and unstudied synthetic drug developed lifelong symptoms similar to those of Parkinson’s disease after just one dose.

RESOURCES

Parents - The Antidrug:
800-662-HELP
www.theantidrug.com

The Partnership at Drugfree.org:
855-378-4373
www.drugfree.org
www.timetotalk.org

National Institute on Drug Abuse - Parenting Resources:
www.drugabuse.gov/parents-teachers

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A PARENT’S GUIDE: Synthetic Drugs



The only difference between a legal synthetic drug and an illegal one is usually a matter of time.



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Legal or Not?

It takes over a year of intense work for government agencies to conduct thorough research to document dangers and possible legitimate uses. Once the research is complete, officials can confiscate designer drugs from stores and prosecute manufacturers and users. This results in a depraved cycle where manufacturers synthesize a new drug, place it on the market, and immediately begin designing a replacement for it. When drug agencies are finally able to collect enough evidence to make the new substance illegal, manufacturers have their replacement ready to sell, and the cycle begins all over again.



Unknown Dangers – Known Consequences

Tragically, the dangers of synthetic drugs usually become known at the expense of users. Manufacturers have no concern for the safety of their customers, and have no qualms about placing untested, unpredictable brain-altering chemicals in the hands of anyone who is willing to buy them. Those who use synthetic drugs are taking huge risks to their own life and health. When damage is done, these users have unintentionally become human laboratory subjects in which the drugs' dangers can be studied.

Many cases have shown that, as expected, drugs that attempt to copy the psychoactive effects of LSD, marijuana, and other illegal substances carry very similar dangers. Often,

synthetic drugs actually contain small amounts of the illicit drug they are copying. Addiction is an obvious consequence of exposure to mind-altering chemicals, as is brain damage. Even when these drugs work exactly as intended, the users become disconnected from reality and can place themselves in extremely dangerous situations without realizing it. Overdosing is a very common problem as well and can lead to hospitalization, long-term negative health consequences, and even death. For parents, the stakes are too high. Your child's best chance to avoid these drugs is to understand their dangers so that they are not fooled by their "legal" status. You can help educate your child about these drugs and discuss strategies to cope with peer pressure if they are influenced by others to take them.

Recognizing Synthetic Drugs

Knowledge is Power! Knowing how to spot synthetic drugs is a vital step in protecting your child from them.

These products are often sold in foil packets or small plastic jars. Most synthetic drugs are in the form of a white powder. In the case of marijuana alternatives, the synthetic drug may be sprayed on organic material (like tea or tobacco leaves) suitable for smoking.

The manufacturers are expert at slyly disguising their synthetic drugs to avoid legal trouble by marketing them under names that hide what they really are. They are often labeled as "bath salts," "plant food," and "herbal incense" with warning labels stating: "Not for human consumption". If a user suffers injury or death as a result of ingesting the drugs, manufacturers protect themselves



from lawsuits by referring to the warning label on their packages.

Synthetic drug producers are also deceptive in how the internet sales of these drugs appear on receipts and shipping labels and how they are packaged.



Often, they are listed under false names in order to avoid the notice of law enforcement and watchful parents. To see through their camouflage, check all of your credit card and bank statements regularly. If a transaction or shipment looks suspicious, do not hesitate to find out exactly what product was involved.

Protecting Your Child

Internet – Check your child's browser history to see what sites they have been visiting. Block access to sites that sell synthetic drugs and talk with your child if you see they have visited any of these sites.

Credit Cards and Bank Statements – Keep track of all purchases. Your credit card company can provide a phone number for the company that charged your account, and you can directly inquire with them about the purchase.

Mail – Be on the lookout for packages you didn't order. Shipping labels and documentation are intentionally misleading.

Home – Be on the lookout for white powder or ash residues in your child's room or other places they like to hang out in the home.

Behavior – Any extreme changes of behavior can be a warning sign. A sudden shift in friends, increased secrecy, asking for money more than usual are some tell-tale signs of substance use.



Drug Testing – Because of the slippery nature of synthetic drugs, most drug tests won't detect usage since the tests can't keep up with the ever-changing market of mind-altering substances. Your child could pass a drug test even if they are using a synthetic drug.

Preventing Abuse

Kids who avoid illegal drugs because of the possible criminal consequences may be tempted, tricked, or coerced into using synthetic drugs sold over the counter. As a parent, initiate an ongoing conversation with your child about how these substances are produced and how dangerously little is known about them. Together, you and your child can educate yourselves about synthetic drugs and the marketing strategies of producers to attract young users. Let your child know that synthetic drugs are just as dangerous as the better-known illegal ones; they just fall into a temporary legal loophole.

Unfortunately, synthetic drugs are here to stay. Parents, educators and the justice system all have a share in the responsibility to save the lives of our young people. Just because the government has not yet been able to make a substance illegal does not mean it is safe.

Be watchful. Be involved. Protect your loved ones from the dangers of synthetic drugs.