

Media Tip Sheet: Synthetic Cathinones

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the Drug
Policy
Alliance.

What are “bath salts?”

“Bath salts” is a commonly used term for a class of substances more accurately called synthetic cathinones. They are related to a naturally occurring stimulant found in the khat plant, and reportedly have similar effects as cocaine, MDMA, and amphetamines.¹ Their effects can include increased energy and alertness, an elevated mood, and sociability. In the early 2000s, legal synthetic cathinone products began appearing in convenience stores and bodegas in the United States. The term “bath salts” comes from how the products

were marketed in stores and online both before and after they were outlawed: as innocuous household products rather than as psychoactive drugs. Initially, what was considered “bath salts” mainly included methylenedioxyprovalerone (MDVP), but today could refer to any number of synthetic cathinones.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“Commonly known as “bath salts,” synthetic cathinones are substances that reportedly have similar effects as cocaine, MDMA, and amphetamines.”

What risks are associated with synthetic cathinone use?

Synthetic cathinones share many of the same potential risks as other stimulants: diminished appetite, increased heart rate, anxiety, confusion, and paranoia. There are significant gaps in our knowledge concerning both the short and long term effects of synthetic cathinones, particularly for newer, less researched substances like alpha-PVP (commonly known as “flakka” or “gravel”). This, and a lack of regulation, ensures that those taking synthetic cathinones often do not know exactly what they are taking, whether they are using the

right dose, or what greater risks come with combining other drugs.²

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“A hospitalized man was found to have alpha-PVP, commonly known as “flakka,” in his system. Alpha-PVP is a relatively new substance that falls under the category of synthetic cathinones. Due to a lack of regulation and research, much is unknown about what risks are associated with alpha-PVP.”

Can synthetic cathinone use turn people into crazed flesh- eating zombies?

No. In 2010-12, a rash of sensationalized media stories reported instances of crazed, violent, and even cannibalistic behavior, supposedly linked to the use of “bath salts.”³ A few more cases have popped up in the media more recently as well, primarily out of Florida.⁴ These cases exhibit what is known as “excited delirium,” a controversial diagnosis that is not officially recognized by the American Medical Association and other groups, and seems to mainly come up during instances of excessive police force.⁵ It is characterized by anxiety, hallucinations, disorientation, a rise in body temperature, insensitivity to pain,

and hyper-aggression.⁶ These side-effects are very rare; their frequency has been grossly exaggerated by the media. In fact, the most notorious of these stories, involving a man in Miami, later proved to be unconnected to bath salts.⁷

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“A man believed to be on “bath salts” was arrested and hospitalized after exhibiting what police described as hyper-aggressive behavior and an insensitivity to pain. Despite this report, toxicology later revealed that no synthetic cathinones were in his system.”

Are synthetic cathinones legal?

When synthetic cathinone products began to appear in convenience stores in the early 2000s they were not specifically banned by state or federal drug laws. They were sold legally as “plant food” or hygienic products – hence the name “bath salts” – and marked “not for human consumption.” In 2012, the Synthetic Drug Abuse Act placed many synthetic cathinones into Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act, the most prohibitive classification possible. However, this did little to curb access to synthetic cathinones among the general public: it simply shifted supply

to the internet and individual sellers. Moreover, manufacturers of synthetic cathinones easily skirt the law by making small changes to the chemical formulas, producing newer unscheduled, and unresearched, synthetic cathinones.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“Federal and state laws banning synthetic cathinones are easily sidestepped. Manufacturers simply tinker with the chemical formulas and create newer synthetic cathinones that are not yet banned.”

What can be done to better manage synthetic cathinone use and its risks?

Focusing efforts and resources on banning substances and incarcerating sellers is ineffective and does little to curb supply. Alternative approaches to the challenges these substances present include:

1. Provide comprehensive drug education

This should not only alert people of the potential risks, but also provide strategies to reduce potential harm if they choose to use.

2. Provide free public, community-level access to drug checking services

Synthetic cathinones are often taken unknowingly. Products sold as “molly” – a slang term for MDMA – are often adulterated with “bath salts.”⁸ Making drug checking services publicly available through community outreach services would prevent many deaths.

3. Create research opportunities and regulation

Within the wide range of synthetic cathinones on the market today, some compounds may hold promising

applications within medicine that are currently unexplored. These substances should be evaluated by regulatory bodies for general health and safety concerns.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“To better protect the public from the risks associated with synthetic cathinones, drug policy experts stress the importance of providing comprehensive drug education, as well as free, community-level access to drug checking services – so called “bath salts” are often taken unknowingly by those attempting to take MDMA or other drugs. Additionally, these substances should be evaluated by regulatory bodies for general safety concerns and potential medical applications.”

For more information, please see:

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www.drugpolicy.org/news
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Endnotes

1. https://www.erowid.org/references/refs_view.php?ID=8477
2. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13181-011-0193-z>
3. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/06/08/rudy-eugene-brian-de-leon-and-more-crazy-bath-salt-freakouts.html>
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5. http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/jurisprudence/2015/06/excited_delirium_deaths_in_police_custody_diagnosis_or_cover_up.html
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