

Media Tip Sheet: Synthetic Cannabinoids

We are
the Drug
Policy
Alliance.

What is “synthetic marijuana”?

“Synthetic marijuana”, “Spice”, and “K2” are a few common yet misleading terms for a class of substances more accurately called synthetic cannabinoids. Synthetic cannabinoids often act on many of the same receptors in the brain as THC, the active ingredient in marijuana. However, synthetic cannabinoids work more strongly on those receptors, and may contribute to unpleasant effects – like anxiety, increased heart rate, paranoia, and nausea – more often than seen with marijuana use.¹ We urge not using the term “synthetic marijuana” because

it perpetuates the myth that these substances are alike. Similarly, “Spice” and “K2”, popular brand names from when synthetic cannabinoids were still legal, could now refer to any number of different synthetic cannabinoids, each with different and inconsistent effects.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“A man was hospitalized after having a bad reaction from smoking K2, a common term for synthetic cannabinoid products. What’s called “K2” could actually be any one of hundreds of synthetic cannabinoids.”

Are synthetic cannabinoids legal?

Synthetic cannabinoid products began appearing mid-2000s, prompting states to pass various laws banning their sale. In 2012, the Synthetic Drug Abuse Prevention Act placed many synthetic cannabinoids into Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act (CSA).² However, manufacturers can easily skirt specific bans by making small changes to the chemical formulas, producing newer synthetic cannabinoids that are not yet scheduled. These laws have proven to be ineffective in preventing

risks and reducing rates of usage.³ Instead, their enforcement disproportionately impacts black and brown communities and drives mass incarceration.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“In practice, federal and state laws banning synthetic cannabinoids do little for prevention while disproportionately impacting communities of color and driving mass incarceration.”

Who’s using synthetic cannabinoid products like “Spice” and “K2” and why?

Since standard drug testing currently only tests for THC found in plant-based marijuana, synthetic cannabinoids go undetected. This appeals to people subjected to drug testing, like active military personnel, professional athletes, people on parole, and people in monitored treatment for substance misuse. Additionally, synthetic cannabinoid products offer homeless and low-income people a cheap, accessible alternative to marijuana. The synthetic cannabinoid market meets a demand created by

the ongoing prohibition of marijuana; most people would be less likely to use if legally regulated marijuana were accessible to them.⁴

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“Synthetic cannabinoid products are often chosen due to their low cost and their ability to fly under the radar of drug tests. Most users would choose marijuana if it were a legally accessible option.”

What risks are associated with synthetic cannabinoid use?

Producers and manufacturers are constantly changing the chemical formulas in an effort to skirt the law, leading to products that often contain an inconsistent and unreliable combination of synthetic cannabinoids. Additionally, due to the lack of regulation, precise dosing or mixing of chemicals vary widely. It's impossible to know exactly what chemicals, and how much of them, are in any given batch. Emergency rooms report visits relating to synthetic cannabinoid products for agitation, increased heart rate, nausea, and strong

hallucinations in a way that isn't seen with marijuana.⁵ However, because of limited research, we know very little about long term impact or addictive potential at this point.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“Synthetic cannabinoids pose greater potential risks to users than marijuana, and due to lack of regulation, it’s near impossible to know exactly what chemicals, and how much of them are in any given synthetic cannabinoid product.”

What can be done to prevent these risks?

In addition to being ineffective, prohibition has contributed to the ever-changing and continuously growing catalog of synthetic cannabinoids available in the unregulated underground market. Alternative approaches to the challenges these substances present include:

1. Provide outreach and services for vulnerable populations

Synthetic cannabinoids are most commonly used by those suffering from chaotic life situations, like people struggling with mental health issues, the homeless, and low-income earners. These populations don't need to be

criminalized; they need housing, job opportunities, and access to treatment. Also, harm reduction-oriented information should be provided to service providers who work with vulnerable communities so that they are equipped to deal with acute intoxication episodes compassionately and effectively.

2. Provide comprehensive drug education about emerging substances

This should not only alert people to potential risks but also give them strategies to stay safe if they choose to use.

3. Legalize marijuana

Synthetic cannabinoid products are mostly used as a substitute for natural plant-based marijuana. Legalizing marijuana would reduce much of the demand for synthetic cannabinoids by offering people a legal, accessible, and far safer option.

4. Create regulation

Synthetic cannabinoids are largely untested and their effects and potential medical applications are often unknown. The creation of a regulatory body like the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) would allow for health and safety testing as well as regulation.⁶ This health-oriented approach would do far more to protect the public than would continued criminalization.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“To better protect the public from the risks associated with synthetic cannabinoids, drug policy experts stress the importance of providing outreach and services to the vulnerable populations that are most impacted, as well as comprehensive drug education to the public. Furthermore, legalizing marijuana would go a long way to reduce the overall demand for synthetic cannabinoids to begin with.”

For more information, please see:

www.drugpolicy.org/drug-facts
www.drugpolicy.org/news
or email:
Tony Newman,
Media Relations Director
newman@drugpolicy.org

Endnotes

1. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4582439/>
2. <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/112/s3190/text>
3. <http://www.npr.org/2012/07/12/156615024/fake-pot-is-a-real-problem-for-regulators>
4. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/234067192_Synthetic_Cannabis_A_comparison_of_patterns_of_use_and_effect_profile_with_natural_Cannabis_in_a_large_global_sample
5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3567606/>
6. <http://www.vice.com/read/why-america-needs-an-fda-for-recreational-drugs-813>