

Synthetic Marijuana Spurs State Bans



Dan Gill for The New York Times

Julie Meyers, 20, smoked synthetic marijuana at Petra Cafe and Hookah Bar in St. Louis days before a ban was signed into law.

By MALCOLM GAY
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ST. LOUIS — Seated at a hookah lounge in the Tower Grove district, Albert Kuo trained his lighter above a marbleized glass pipe stuffed with synthetic [marijuana](#). Inhaling deeply, Mr. Kuo, an art student at an area college, singed the pipe's leafy contents, emitting a musky cloud of smoke into the afternoon light.

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Mr. Kuo, 25, had gathered here with a small cohort of friends for what could be the last time they legally get high in Missouri on a substance known popularly as K2, a blend of herbs

treated with synthetic marijuana.

"I know it's not going to kill me," said Mr. Kuo, who likened the drug's effects to clove [cigarettes](#). "It's a waste of time, effort and money to ban something like this."

On Tuesday, Gov. Jay Nixon, a Democrat, signed a bill prohibiting possession of K2. Missouri is the nation's eighth state this year to ban the substance, which has sent users to emergency rooms across the country complaining of everything from elevated heart rates and paranoia to [vomiting](#) and [hallucinations](#).

Investigators blame the drug in at least one death, and this month, Gov. Mike Beebe of Arkansas, a Democrat, signed an emergency order banning the substance. Similar prohibitions are pending in at least six other states, including Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, New Jersey, New York and Ohio, according to the [National Conference of State Legislatures](#).

"It's like a tidal wave," said Ward Franz, the state representative who sponsored Missouri's legislation. "It's almost an epidemic. We're seeing middle-school kids walking into stores and buying it."

Often marketed as incense, K2 — which is also known as Spice, Demon or Genie — is sold openly in gas stations, head shops and, of course, online. It can sell for as much as \$40 per gram. The substance is banned in many European countries, but by marketing it as incense and clearly stating that it is not for human consumption, domestic sellers have managed to evade federal regulation.

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“Everybody knows it’s not incense,” said Barbara Carreno, a spokeswoman for the federal [Drug Enforcement Administration](#). “That’s done with a wink and a nod.”

First developed in the lab of a [Clemson University](#) chemist, [John W. Huffman](#), K2’s active ingredients are synthetic cannabinoids — research-grade chemicals that were created for therapeutic purposes but can also mimic the narcotic effects of tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, the active ingredient in marijuana.

In a statement, Mr. Huffman said the chemicals were not intended for human use. He added that his lab had developed them for research purposes only, and that “their effects in humans have not been studied and they could very well have toxic effects.”

Nevertheless, pure forms of the chemical are available online, and investigators believe that many sellers are buying bulk quantities, mixing them with a potpourrilike blend of herbs and labeling the substance K2.

“It’s not like there’s one K2 distributor — everybody is making their own stuff, calling it K2 and selling it, which is the most unnerving aspect,” said Dr. Christopher Rosenbaum, an assistant professor of toxicology at the [University of Massachusetts](#) who is studying the effects of K2 in emergency room patients.

The [American Association of Poison Control Centers](#) reports that so far this year there have been 567 K2-related calls, up from 13 in 2009. But investigators add that no one is really certain what is in K2, and people are arriving at emergency rooms with symptoms that would not normally be associated with marijuana or a synthetic form of the drug.

“I don’t know how many people are going for a box of doughnuts after [smoking](#) K2, but they’re sure getting some other symptoms,” said Dr. Anthony Scalzo, a professor of emergency medicine at the St. Louis University who first reported a rise in K2-related cases and is collaborating with Dr. Rosenbaum in researching K2’s effects. “These are very anxious, agitated people that are requiring several doses of [sedatives](#).”

Dr. Scalzo, who is also the medical director for the Missouri Poison Control Center, added that although tests had found cannabinoids in K2, it was unclear “whether the reaction we’re seeing is just because of dose effect, or if there’s something in there we haven’t found yet.”

That question remains at the center of an investigation into the death of David Rozga, an Iowa teenager who last month committed [suicide](#) shortly after smoking K2. Mr. Rozga, 18, had graduated from high school one week earlier and was planning to attend college in the fall.

According to the police report, Mr. Rozga smoked the substance with friends and then began “freaking out,” saying he was “going to hell.” He then returned to his parents’ house, grabbed a rifle from the family’s gun room and shot himself in the head.

“There was nothing in the investigation to show he was depressed or sad or anything,” said Detective Sgt. Brian Sher of the Indianola Police Department, who led the investigation. “I’ve seen it all. I don’t know what else to attribute it to. It has to be K2.”

But many users say they are undaunted by reports of negative reactions to the drug. K2 does not show up on drug tests, and users say that while they would like to know what is in it, they would take their chances if it means a clean urine test.

The Missouri ban, which goes into effect Aug. 28, prohibits several cannabinoids that investigators have found in K2 and related products. Nevertheless, investigators and researchers say that bans like the one in Missouri are little more than “Band-Aids” that street chemists can sidestep with a slight alteration to a chemical’s molecular structure.

“Once it goes illegal, I already have something to replace it with,” said Micah Riggs, who sells the product at his coffee shop in Kansas City. “There are hundreds of these synthetics, and we just go about it a couple of them at a time.”

Investigators say that a more effective ban might arise once the Drug Enforcement Administration completes its review of cannabinoids, placing them under the Controlled Substances Act. Currently, however, [only one such substance is controlled under the act](#), though the agency has listed four others as “chemicals of concern.”

“It’s hard to keep up with everything,” said Ms. Carreno of the D.E.A., adding, “The process of scheduling something is thorough and time consuming, and there are a lot of gifted chemists out there.”

Meanwhile, states are largely on their own when it comes to controlling this new breed of synthetic cannabis, which often comes down to a game of cat-and-mouse where law enforcement agents, politicians, users and their families must formulate new responses as each iteration of a drug comes to market.

“Where does a parent go to get answers?” asked Mike Rozga, who said he learned of K2 only after his son’s death. “We talk to our kids about sex. We talk to our kids about drugs, and we talk to our kids about drinking and being responsible. But how can you talk to your kids about something you don’t even know about?”

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