

Synthetic pot: Spice of life or new drug scourge?

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At his Catonsville head shop, Peace of Sunshine, owner Larry Zwick sells tie-dyed T-shirts, hookahs and ornate glass bongos.

But one item recently added to the menu of the store at the corner of Frederick Road and Mellor Avenue has turned into a hot seller: Spice.

"The Spice thing is huge," Zwick said. "It's lucrative. In the last six months, I get five to 10 calls a day asking for it. I sell it because it's legal and because people want it."

A packet of Spice contains crushed leaves sprayed with a synthetic substance that provides a high similar to marijuana when smoked. A gram can sell for \$20, which makes it between two- and four-times as expensive as illegal marijuana.

Marketed as incense or potpourri, Spice and similar products have been sold since 2006.

But those sales have shown a dramatic spike, data show.

As of Aug. 2, the American Association of Poison Control Centers had logged 866 cases from 48 states in which a person reported a negative reaction after using synthetic marijuana in 2010.

In 2009, there were 13 such reports.

Angel Bivens, public education coordinator for the Maryland poison center, said she's received "less than a dozen" calls reporting negative side-effects from Spice.

"It's been nothing serious," she said. "It's been people who decided to try the stuff and didn't like how they felt. Either they called us or the ER (emergency room) called us."

Even so, Bivens said she found the rise in the use of Spice "concerning."

"There are all kinds of substances that are lumping under the one name, Spice," she said. "Any time you're putting something in your body, and you don't know what it is, that can be dangerous."

One such concerned citizen is Catonsville resident Jill Smith.

Smith said she had never heard of Spice until learning last week that the synthetic marijuana was being sold at Peace of Sunshine and went in the store to confront the owner.

"I got really concerned," she said. "I popped in there to check it out. He ought to be ashamed of himself. I realize they can get it on the Internet, but we don't have to give it to them on a silver platter."

Peace of Sunshine is one of a handful of Baltimore-area stores that sell the substances, Zwick said.

Others are in downtown Baltimore or on the eastern side of the county, he said.

As Smith said, many people simply go online and order it shipped to their homes.

That's how former Baltimore County drug czar Mike Gimbel, now a substance abuse education consultant, got it.

Gimbel said he ordered it online, had it delivered to his house, and found the price to be a "rip off."

"We're very, very concerned," he said. "It's a growing trend among teenagers."

"The side effects of using the drug seem to be getting worse, not better. We have reports of high blood pressure, heart rates going up, hallucinating, vomiting, hospitalization. It's a very, very dangerous drug."

Spice is also marketed under several other brand names, including K2, Black Magic and the subtle Fake Weed.

Generally, it consists of incense or other crushed leaves, sprayed with synthetic cannabinoids, such as JWH-018, which produce a marijuana-like "high" in users.

Labels on the packages usually tell users not to consume the substance.

"It's sold as incense," Gimbel said. "That's the problem here. They're not breaking a law. Someone needs to step up and ban this stuff."

Spice has been banned in seven states, and legislation is proposed in eight others, but not in Maryland.

Harvard University economics professor Jeffrey Miron, a scholar at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the popularity of Spice is fueled by marijuana's continued illegality.

"Given that it's more expensive, less pleasant, doesn't smell as good, and has some negative side effects, the only reason it's out there is because the other stuff is illegal," Miron said.

"Moonshine whiskey exists because of prohibition and high taxes. A few people make their own beer because it's fun, but most people who make moonshine do so because it's cheaper."

In the meantime, Smith said she wants Zwick to remove Spice from his store. For his part, Zwick said he was in the U.S. Coast Guard for 22 years and respects the laws of the country. He said he would stop selling Spice if it was made illegal.

"Who knows how long it's going to be legal?" he asked.

Zwick said he checks IDs and is no more to blame for underage kids who find a way to get the product than a liquor store owner is when a minor drinks beer.

"I never sell anything to minors," he said.

"It's not the store owner's responsibility to parent your children."

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