

FLAKKA: DANGEROUS NEW DRUG TREND

Police in south Florida have seen a growing number of cases of bizarre and uncontrollable behavior linked to a street drug called flakka, one of the newer chemicals in the booming category of synthetic or designer drugs. Flakka is a designer drug that can be snorted, smoked, injected or swallowed. It may also be combined with other, softer drugs such as marijuana.

Flakka is most typically made from the chemical alpha-PVP, which is a synthetic version of the amphetamine-like stimulant cathinone. Cathinones are chemicals derived from the khat plant grown in the Middle East and Somalia, where the leaves are frequently chewed for a euphoric buzz. The immediate and long-term effects of cathinones can rival some of the strongest crystal meth and cocaine.

Jim Hall, an epidemiologist at the Center for Applied Research on Substance Use and Health Disparities at Nova Southeastern University in Broward County, Florida, told CBS News that cathinones are the next, even more potent class of drugs to take over where MDMA leaves off. MDMA, known widely as Molly, has been the cause of a number of fatalities and the recent round of overdoses that hospitalized a dozen people at Wesleyan University.

Hall says the drug is designed to cause the brain to flood with dopamine, a hormone that helps control the brain's reward and pleasure centers, and then block the transmitters, producing an intense feeling of euphoria. "Normally when dopamine would be released, even naturally or even with other drugs, it then gets reuptaked -- it goes back to its original transmitting neuron," said Hall. "But in this case, its reuptake is blocked so it remains there."

Taking additional flakka while already high -- a practice known as "snacking" -- or combining cathinones with other drugs often leads to serious health complications including rapid heart rate, agitation, extreme aggression and psychosis.

"We're starting to see a rash of cases of a syndrome referred to as excited delirium," said Hall. "This is where the body goes into hyperthermia, generally a temperature of 105 degrees. The individual becomes psychotic, they often rip off their clothes and run out into the street violently and have an adrenaline-like strength and police

are called and it takes four or five officers to restrain them. Then once they are restrained, if they don't receive immediate medical attention they can die."

Cathinone use can also cause rhabdomyolysis, which is a melting of the muscle tissue and the release of muscle fibers into the blood stream. This can lead to kidney failure and result in a user needing permanent dialysis.

In recent years there's been a rise in the number of national crime lab reports for cathinones, along with a decline in cases involving MDMA, which is the active chemical in both Molly and Ecstasy.

Hall says designer drugs like flakka are not always pure, which means that frequently the customer and dealer don't actually know what's in the product. Hall says that in 2013 there were a total of 126 reported deaths tied to synthetic cathinone in Florida.

Hall added that there have been recent reports of a designer drug marketed as flakka in Ohio and Houston as well as Florida.

Flakka is one of a number of cathinone-based drugs that are produced in China and sold online to small-time drug gangs in the U.S. And the business is lucrative. Hall says that with small investment of only a few thousand dollars, a dealer can walk away with as much as \$75,000.

"The main issue with this whole category is that the user just doesn't know what they're taking or the strength of what they're taking, and literally they are the guinea pigs," he said. "We're referring to these as the guinea pig drugs. Often the dealer might not even know what they're selling."

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