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# **NEWS RELEASE**

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Contact: John D. Bowman, R.Ph.  
Regional Health Awareness Board  
361.221.0704

## **Synthetic Marijuana: The Spice of Death**

By: Brian K. Standard

Synthetic marijuana, commonly referred to as “spice” or “K2,” has become an increasingly prevalent problem across Texas. “In Corpus Christi, the number of EMS calls related to synthetic marijuana increased from 120 in 2015 to 167 in 2016,” according to Brian Standard, a student at the Texas A&M Rangel School of Pharmacy in Kingsville. “This is a 39% increase and it reflects the trend across Texas. According to a study conducted by Jane Maxwell, Ph.D. from the University of Texas, 412 individuals were admitted to substance abuse treatment programs in Texas for synthetic marijuana in 2014 compared to 720 individuals in 2015.

People abuse synthetic marijuana for many reasons and many incorrectly believe that it is similar to normal marijuana, derived from the cannabis plant. However, this is not the case. Synthetic cannabinoids may be 2-100 times more potent than native THC. Effects may include vomiting, chest pain, rapid heartbeat, visual blackouts, kidney damage, high blood pressure, agitation and psychosis. Reactions to synthetic marijuana are more intense and more frequent than reactions to natural marijuana. Although deaths are rare, adverse reactions and deaths have steadily increased. Twenty deaths have been attributed to synthetic marijuana with many more expected. A sixteen-year-old high school student in Galveston County who died in January, 2017 is thought to have died from synthetic marijuana.

Many users choose synthetic marijuana because it will not show up on drug tests. Drug testing companies are in a perpetual race with synthetic marijuana producers to identify and detect new forms of synthetic marijuana. There are now over 150 different forms of synthetic marijuana compounds.

The “high” that cannabis users feel is a result of THC produced by the cannabis plant. THC acts in a variety of ways at different places throughout the body, and the “high” is a result of its action on receptors of brain cells. Synthetic marijuana is made by soaking plant material in chemicals produced in laboratories. Early forms of synthetic marijuana used chemicals that were never intended for human use. Cannabinoids, including THC

as well as the chemicals in synthetic marijuana, act on cannabinoid (also known as CB) receptors in the brain. The effects of synthetic marijuana are mediated by their effects on different types of CB receptors in different parts of the body.

Since then, laboratories producing synthetic marijuana have modified the structures of these chemicals to stay one step ahead of law enforcement. Before the state or federal authorities can ban a substance under the Controlled Substance Act, the substance must first be identified and its chemical structure confirmed. Hundreds of different chemicals have been identified in synthetic marijuana across the country, and often times no medical or scientific information is available about them. Medical problems associated with synthetic marijuana are highly variable and often unpredictable.

State and federal authorities continue to ban these chemicals as they are discovered, but the people manufacturing the chemicals used in synthetic marijuana are often able to quickly change the chemical they create in order to stay ahead of these bans. The highly dynamic and often unknown nature of synthetic marijuana makes it a difficult public health issue to address.

What's the best advice? Avoid all forms of illegal drugs natural or synthetic.

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