

Governor Andrew M. Cuomo today issued a health alert warning New Yorkers of a recent increase in the use of a synthetic cannabinoid that has sent more than 160 patients to the hospital since April 8. The dangerous drug, identified by the street names, such as “spice” and “K2” is abused by mainly teens and young adults and is known to be marketed as incense, herbal mixtures or potpourri in order to mask its true purpose. The sale and possession of these substances in New York had been banned under Health Department regulations issued at the Governor’s urging in 2012.

“Synthetic drugs are anything but harmless, and this rash of severe health emergencies across the state is direct proof,” Governor Cuomo said. “We banned synthetic marijuana, bath salts and similar substances to avoid the disastrous results that occur – and as law enforcement and health officials continue to crack down on the use and sale of these drugs in New York, we are today issuing a health alert as a warning amidst this surge in hospitalizations.”

Calls to New York State poison control centers due to the use of synthetic cannabinoids increased dramatically in the last two weeks. Users of the synthetic mixtures typically experience symptoms that include agitation, anxiety, nausea, vomiting, high blood pressure, tremor, seizures, hallucinations, paranoia and violent behavior. These effects can be similar to those of phencyclidine, or PCP.

Acting New York State Health Commissioner Dr. Howard Zucker said, “Drugs like ‘spice’ pose a significant threat to public health and New Yorkers need to be aware of the dangers. Since the exact compounds contained in synthetic cannabinoid products change so frequently, it’s often impossible for users to know exactly what they are putting in their body. This has produced unpredictable adverse reactions and landed far too many people in the hospital – some in intensive care units for treatment.”

New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services Commissioner Arlene González-Sánchez said, “These substances are artificially manufactured drugs that change brain function. Young people may be fooled into thinking that these substances are safe because they are sold over the counter or are in colorful packaging, but they are not made for human consumption. They are dangerous and can have significant, long-term effects on the brain.”

Synthetic cannabinoids are marketed as legal and typically consist of plant material coated by chemicals which are supposed to mimic THC, the active chemical compound in marijuana. The products often carry a "not for human consumption" label in order to disguise the true purpose of the substance. These drugs are often referred to by different names, including: Spice, K2, Blonde, Summit, Standard, Blaze, Red Dawn X, Citron, Green Giant, Smacked, Wicked X, AK-47, synthetic marijuana, or legal marijuana. Additional names from some recent reported cases include: Geeked Up, Ninja, Caution, Red Giant or Keisha Kole.

In August 2012, the New York State Department of Health, at the Governor's urging, issued regulations banning the sale and possession of dozens of substances used to make synthetic cannabinoids and bath salts. The regulations also allowed an owner of an establishment and/or an employee selling synthetic drugs to be charged with possession of an illicit substance, which is punishable with a fine up to \$500, or 15 days in jail, or a civil penalty of up to \$2,000 per violation. The Department of Health continues to partner with the New York State Police and other law enforcement agencies to crack down on the use of these synthetic drugs as they evolve.

If you are aware of locations where this product is being sold or distributed, please call 1-888-99-SALTS (1-888-997-2587).