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# CHICAGO NEWS COOPERATIVE; Illinois Bans K2, but That Might Not Stop the Bad Trips

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Last week, it was perfectly legal to walk into a Chicago smoke shop and buy any variety of K2 incense, a synthetic marijuana product. At 12:01 a.m. Jan. 1, it became a felony offense to buy, sell or possess the drug. But the authorities worry the ban will not be effective for long.

K2, which is increasingly popular with high school and college students, is little known to anyone older than 25. Its chemical-laced herbs are sold online and in stores as incense "for aromatherapy and intense meditation," as one distributor puts it. In reality, users smoke K2 products because they contain one or more chemicals developed to mimic the effects of THC, the active ingredient in marijuana.

K2 does not show up on standard urinalysis drug tests, said Will Taylor, a spokesman for the Chicago field office of the Drug Enforcement Administration, making it especially attractive to athletes and parolees. Medical officials, including Dr. Michael Wahl, director of the Illinois Poison Center, warn of the drug's unpredictable and dangerous side effects, which can include elevated heart rate, panic attacks and seizures.

On Saturday, Illinois became the 17th state to outlaw K2, making possession and sale of the drug a felony offense. Meagan Dorsch, a spokeswoman for the National Conference of State Legislatures, said more states will most likely follow suit. "We expect K2 to be a hot topic in 2011," she said.

But there is a catch. Drug laws are written to ban specific chemicals. And like most synthetic drugs, K2 can be repeatedly altered by replacing illegal chemicals with legal alternatives. "This is one of the most frustrating things about synthetic drugs," Mr. Taylor said.

He said that as soon as one synthetic drug is outlawed, or when parents and the police become familiar with it, the formula changes and another product appears.

A manager of the Smokes and Such shop in Skokie, who requested anonymity, said he removed K2 products from the store weeks ago in anticipation of the ban. But a K2 sales representative told him that the company's new blends, K2 Sex and K2 Sky, have been made using legal chemicals and are unaffected by the new laws. The shop is selling the new formulations, the manager said.

A federal ban is not yet on the books. On Nov. 24, the D.E.A. issued an Emergency Notice of Intent -- the first use of this action since 2003, when the agency moved against another synthetic drug -- to control five of the chemicals used to make K2. A notice alerts the public at least 30 days before the drugs are designated as controlled substances, giving the D.E.A. time to decide whether to make the ban permanent.

The Chicago Police Department did not respond to requests for comments.

Ken Kaupas, director of public affairs for the Will County Sheriff's Office, said his department was aware of the drug and preparing to enforce the state ban. "We're planning compliance checks and stings at retail," he said, "the same way we check compliance for age limits on cigarette and alcohol purchases."

Liane Jackson, a spokeswoman for the Cook County Sheriff's Office, said Monday that she

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had never heard of K2, much less a statewide ban.

That makes sense, Mr. Taylor said. After all, K2 was legal until Saturday. "The vast majority of police departments are dealing with heroin and cocaine," Mr. Taylor said. "Synthetic cannabinoids are just now becoming a problem."

State Representative Kenneth Dunkin, Democrat of the 5th District and the bill's chief sponsor in the Illinois House, acknowledged that the ban must evolve as new formulations are introduced. But he wanted to get a law on the books, he said, because the drug was "wreaking havoc."

In 2010, the Illinois Poison Center received almost 70 K2-related calls, nearly all from hospital emergency rooms in Chicago and its suburbs. Nationally, poison centers fielded about 2,500 calls this year from emergency departments grappling with K2's side effects.

Once medical workers are more aware of the drug and its side effects, Dr. Wahl said, reports will be more accurate. But the trend is definitely upward, he added. "We've seen more cases in October, November and December than earlier in the year."

Users mistakenly think of K2 as a marijuana substitute, Dr. Wahl said. "People who smoke marijuana don't tend to wind up in the E.R.," he said "They just want to watch a video, eat some ice cream and go to sleep."

Synthetic pot binds to the same brain receptors as its natural cousin, but it binds in a different way, with unpredictable results.

"People who smoke this stuff don't get mellow," Dr. Wahl said. "To use the vernacular, it's a bad trip."

PHOTO: The Smokes and Such store in Skokie sells versions of K2 that the manufacturer says are legal. (PHOTOGRAPH BY JOS ♦ MOR ♦/CHICAGO NEWS COOPERATIVE)

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