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SYNTHETIC CANNABIS: THE FACTS

What is it? Synthetic cannabis is a mix of dried herbs and spices that have been sprayed with a synthetic cannabinoid, a chemical that is similar to THC, the active ingredient in the illegal drug marijuana.

Is it dangerous? Yes. Synthetic cannabis has characteristics of illegal drugs including marijuana, cocaine, and LSD. Smoking synthetic cannabis can lead to experiencing nausea, hallucinations, radical mood swings, a rapid heartbeat, and an unhealthy increase in blood pressure. There is even a warning written on the back of packets of synthetic cannabis that states: Not for human consumption.

Is it lethal? To date, there has not been a case reported in which taking synthetic cannabis directly resulted in someone's death. But there was one case in which an 18-year-old man in Iowa became agitated and violent after taking synthetic cannabis, and later that day he killed himself.

Is it legal? No. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration has made it illegal to possess or sell the five chemicals used to make synthetic cannabis.

Why was it created? The original intent was to create a drug that helped stimulate the appetite of people ill with glaucoma, a disease that can cause blindness. John Huffman, a chemist at Clemson University, created many of the chemicals used to manufacture synthetic cannabis. Huffman says that others started spraying the chemicals on leaves and herbs, and sold the product as a drug to be used for pleasure.

Why do people take it? They are looking for a way to get high, an altered state of being in which a person's physical and emotional state is adversely affected by drug or alcohol use. Many abusers of synthetic cannabis are addicted to other drugs and are looking for any way to get high. In addition, most drug tests do not test for synthetic cannabis. As a result, people who are required to undergo drug testing because they have gotten in trouble with the law or are in drug rehabilitation programs will take synthetic cannabis as a way to escape being exposed as a drug user.

Does the drug go by other names? Yes. It is commonly referred to as K2 or Spice. It also goes by Genie, Zohai, Yucatan Fire, and Silver Surfer.