

# Synthetic cannabis: K2, Spice, Genie, a hazard

Synthetic products resulted in 144 hospital visits

by *Eli Lieberman*

Three deaths and an epidemic of non-lethal cases of severe bleeding in Illinois have been linked to synthetic cannabinoids.

According to Illinois Department of Health, from Mar. 17 to Apr. 19, 144 hospital visits have been determined to be a result of a recent outbreak. All patients used synthetic cannabinoids products, and they were subsequently hospitalized for symptoms such as blood in urine, coughing up blood, severe bloody nose, and bloody gums.

38 of the reported incidents took place in Chicago, including the death of a 22 year old male, and an additional 9 in suburban Cook County. This is greater than most other counties in Illinois, with Peoria County experiencing 48 cases.

Many of the victims tested positive for a blood coagulant. This prevents the blood from properly clotting and healing wounds —the coagulant is also found in rat poison.

Chicago Department of Public Health Chief Medical Officer Allison Arwady told WTTW that “We’re seeing a syndrome where people’s blood is not clotting normally because they’re exposed to synthetic cannabinoids. If they injure themselves, they’ll bleed more than normal.”

The majority of victims are young adults. 83 were younger than 35, and 29 of them younger than 25.

The surge does not seem to be slowing down with the number of users with bleeding doubling in

the last week. All three deaths have been males. Their deaths were not concentrated in one county, however, the tainted products spread across the entire state.

Synthetic cannabinoids are often called synthetic marijuana, as they contain chemicals similar to those of the marijuana plant.

Many times they are sold as safe and legal alternatives to marijuana, but even without contamination, they can affect the brain in much more powerful and damaging ways than marijuana.

The drug broke into the public eye when projected top-10 NFL draft pick, Robert Nkemdiriche, dove out the second story window of a hotel in a paranoid state common among users.

However, bleeding is not a normal symptoms of synthetic marijuana, even for frequent users. Arwady warns “Do not use these products at this time even if you’ve used them in the past. We know that there’s a batch of this product that’s very unsafe, potentially life-threatening and we don’t want people experimenting with them.”

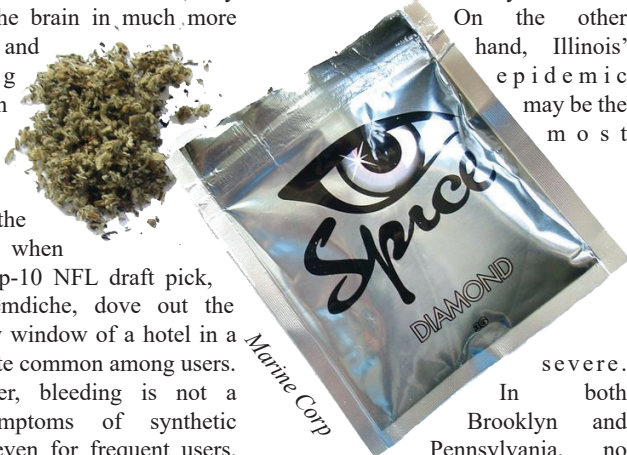
What makes the epidemic even more frightening is the ease of getting that. Some brands can be bought at local convenience stores. Cannabinoids are made by spraying chemicals onto shredded plants and are often very loosely regulated. The drug is often sold under other names such as K2, spice, or “legal weed.”

Police are starting to search for distributors of the laced drug. According to WGN, three men were arrested at a convenience store on the south side of Chicago. A large amount of toxic synthetic cannabinoids were

food in the store, and the men were charged with substance distribution.

The number of synthetic weed poisonings have been on the rise since 2010 and pockets of illnesses related to the drug have been popping up around the country. In 2016, 33 people in Brooklyn became sick after using the drug, and last year 102 citizens of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania overdosed in a span of three days.

On the other hand, Illinois’ epidemic may be the most



severe. In both Brooklyn and Pennsylvania, no deaths were reported.

Additionally, Illinois has already surpassed the total incidents in the two other locations combined.

Dr. Patrick Lank, a medical toxicologist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, told WTTW patients are being treated with vitamin K to help the blood thicken.

With no sign of the incident rate slowing down, Arwady cautions “anyone who has used synthetic cannabinoids and experienced unusual bleeding or bruising should go to the emergency room... even if it seems like minor extra bleeding, there’s treatment available but it needs to be given in a hospital setting with close monitoring.”

# Analysis: Illinois legalization efforts

Your briefing on the current state of cannabis policy in Illinois

by *MacClement Guthrie*

How soon can we expect recreational marijuana in the land of Lincoln? Those of you who voted last march likely saw on your ballot “Shall the State of Illinois legalize the cultivation, manufacture, distribution, testing, and sale of marijuana and marijuana products for recreational use by adults 21 and older subject to state regulation, taxation and local ordinance?”

This is, however, a non-binding ballot question. Nothing is changing, except that with 63.39% of the vote for legalization, proponents have wind in their sails as the state tries to chart its course.

If Illinois legalized, which could conceivably happen as soon as 2020, it would be the first state in the Midwest, which would be a boost to pro-legalization efforts.

A 2007 comprehensive study of census data by the associated press showed that Illinois is the “most average state.” AP further noted that Illinois has acted as a bellwether and as a microcosm of the nation as a whole on social and political issues.

But what’s the path towards legalization look like in Illinois? The most likely path is that with the election of JB Pritzker as governor (all but assured this week with the entree of pro-union republican state senator Sam McCann as an independent), the democratic house and senate would be able to push through legalization.

The largest obstacle in this path is current speaker and recently reelected chair of the Illinois democratic party, Michael Madigan. On Monday, April 23, he announced that he has yet to

make a “final decision” on the issue.

However, I suspect just as Michael Madigan evolved on abortion in the ‘80s and ‘90s under pressure from activists and the then-newly-formed Personal PAC, if he suspects the grassroots turning against him, he will endorse legalization.

There is currently a bill in the general assembly, sponsored by State Senator Heather Steans D-Chicago and state Rep. Kelly Cassidy, D-Chicago that would legalize marijuana for adults over 21, while maintaining Illinois’s current regulation framework for medical marijuana.

There has yet to get much enthusiasm around the bill however as incumbent Governor Rauner has already said he would veto the measure.

Despite signing a 2016 bill, decriminalizing marijuana Rauner has made legalization a line in the sand.

Pritzker is running heavily on this issue, and the democratic primary cemented marijuana legalization as a key issue for voters. Depending on the ability of the governor to whip votes, democrats could feasibly pass the bill during Pritzker’s first year, and Illinois could then see legal recreational marijuana as soon as Jan. 1, 2020.

Democrats are also currently attempting to get a marijuana question (again, only advisory) on the November ballot. Polling has previously shown majority support. And if this question is added to the ballot, it is very likely it would garner statewide support.

So far, all but 1 of the 9 states that have legalized marijuana have done so by ballot referenda. The Illinois constitution allows for ballot referendums only for constitutional amendments, so lawmakers will instead effectively poll the public on issues, and then, supposedly, legislate

# Fentanyl-laced weed an overblown threat

Despite headlines, studies fail to find fentanyl in marijuana supply

by *Darcie Kim*

Local news stories regarding overdoses from fentanyl-laced marijuana have prompted concern about the regulation and quality control of the marijuana industry.

Secretary of Health and Human Services Alex Azar said that the dangers of marijuana have increased in recent years, especially in regards to the potential of lethal synthetic opioids laced in weed.

However, his claims remain unfounded, as reports suggesting that fentanyl-laced weed being responsible for multiple deaths are being proven false.

Azar told a group of students visiting the White House that marijuana is closely related to the opioid epidemic, because drug dealers are attempting to make weed more addictive by lacing it with fentanyl.

“These are very sophisticated operators, and they are lacing other illegal drugs with fentanyl to get you hooked on opioids and bring you into



Fentanyl, the synthetic opioid 75 times stronger than morphine, primarily used in palliative care, but is now fueling the opioid crisis | Nottingham Vet School

their system marijuana laced with fentanyl, [and] all kinds of other products laced with fentanyl,” said Azar.

A number of reports about weed laced with fentanyl have surfaced in 2017, but there is overwhelming evidence proving that many of these claims inaccurate. The reports that were made in 2017 were found by Snopes to be unreliable, since the individuals who initially claimed to only have been using marijuana were actually ingesting other drugs, including opioids.

A large majority of the stories about fentanyl laced weed have been based on self-reporting and unreliable

claims by law enforcement.

According to the Huffington Post, “In other words, there have been no reported cases in which anyone has actually tested marijuana and determined conclusively that it contains fentanyl.”

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is approximately 50 times more potent than heroin, and although it was first introduced as a prescription-only medication, illegal manufacturing of it has made it an increasingly prevalent and deadly street drug. In 2016 alone, more than 20,000 overdose deaths associated with fentanyl were recorded.

Because it is cheap and easy to

acquire on the black market, fentanyl has made its way into bags of heroin, ersatz pills claiming to be Oxycontin or Xanax, and stimulants such as methamphetamine and cocaine.

However, there has not been a single reliable report detecting fentanyl in marijuana, and even the US Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has publicly stated that it is unaware of fentanyl-laced weed.

“As no incident has actually confirmed the presence of marijuana laced specifically with fentanyl, we rank the claim that such a mixture is a real and increasing danger as false,” said DEA spokesman Melvin Patterson.

Although the danger of fentanyl-laced weed has been blown out of proportion by the media and incorrect statements by top government officials, the chance of ingesting marijuana laced with another chemical, albeit slim, still exists.

Supporters of marijuana legalization have argued that until the marijuana market is fully controlled, harmful hybrids will circulate amongst users. The lack of quality control on the black market has been the source of many arguments; people who buy marijuana that has been regulated have a lower chance of ingesting tainted weed.