

Dangerous designer drug hits the streets

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By: Anita Hassan

It started with hallucinations and quickly turned violent. Kevin Anthony Schoolmeyer was driving home to Friends- wood from a party in June when the 21-year-old started to hit his friend sitting in the passenger seat.

Suddenly, his limbs began to flail around, he punched the console and started ripping accessories from the vehicle's interior, according to an autopsy report.

Shortly after that, he died.

Schoolmeyer's was the first case. The following month a 15-year-old Houston girl also returning home from a party with a friend said she felt sick before her arms and legs began thrashing around. About 30 minutes later, she was dead.

Authorities believe what killed these two young people is the newest designer drug hitting Houston's streets: 25I.

The blandly named drug is a synthetic chemical substance that acts as psychedelic hallucinogenic, similar to LSD and ecstasy, according to the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences.

The substance is the latest class of synthetic drugs being abused in Harris County. These designer drugs include stimulants such as those marketed as bath salts and synthetic marijuana.

Found to provoke psychotic and paranoid episodes, the drugs have caused a number of overdoses in the region and country in the last few years.

Hard to regulate

Law enforcement and legislators have been hurrying to ban these substances. However, manufacturers can alter the chemical compounds in numerous ways to skirt existing drug laws, putting them on the market faster than they can be banned.

Drug Enforcement Administration Special Agent Jeffrey Scott, who works in the agency's public affairs sector in Washington, D.C., explained that these synthetic drugs are not only difficult to regulate, but hard for authorities to identify.



[Jeff Walterscheid, assistant chief toxicologist at the Harris County Institute of Forensic Sciences, says the synthetic drug called 25I is a hallucinogenic similar to LSD and ecstasy.]

PHOTO BY: NICK DE LA TORRE



"If I don't know as an investigator what's in those packets, how can anyone just buying them off the street or in those stores have any hope to know what's inside of them - much less what it's going to do to them?" he noted.

Chemists at the county forensics institute began seeing cases of synthetic drugs about two years ago, beginning with synthetic marijuana, then about a year later with bath salts.

Since January, the drug chemistry lab has seen 11 cases where 25I was found in controlled substances brought in for testing by law enforcement agencies.

Officials said the substance is usually found on websites, being sold as a "research chemical." Locally, it has been sold by individual dealers.

"Usually what happens is they purchase it in the powder form and that can be dissolved in a liquid like alcohol and sprayed on blotter paper," said Dr. Warren C. Samms, drug chemistry laboratory manager at the forensics institute. "What we tend to see when we see these cases in the drug lab is that it looks much like LSD paper."

That's what Schoolmeyer told his friend he took at the party they attended: two tabs of LSD, according to the autopsy report. Schoolmeyer's family could not be reached for comment.

The 15-year-old girl who died a month later was at a party and seen carrying a water bottle with an unknown substance inside of it before she died. Her mother declined to comment, saying only that the case was under investigation by the Houston Police Department.

Like many synthetic drugs, 25I was created in academic institutions or other chemistry labs for legitimate research purposes before they became used recreationally.

When consumed by a human, the drug binds to receptors in the nervous system and causes the psychotic behaviors associated with a hallucinogenic, said Dr. Jeff Walterscheid, assistant chief toxicologist at the forensics institute.

Used in cell research

"These research chemicals ... were made for use in laboratories to probe the inner workings of the cells, and for that they are great," Walterscheid said. "But for someone to take it while they are at a party is extremely dangerous."

The modifications of chemical structures vary and present a challenge for testing and detection. Because the forensic institute houses a medical examiner's office and drug laboratories, officials can share their findings and look out for synthetic drug trends such as 25I.

When the forensics institute received the two death cases over the summer, each without apparent explanations for their symptoms, officials began to look to synthetic drugs as the culprit.

"You have to think that way (to test for synthetics)," said the institute's deputy chief medical examiner, Dr. Dwayne Wolf.



"The people that are dying from this are young, healthy individuals with absolutely no psychiatric disorder or anything else to explain why they would all of a sudden go crazy like this and die within hours," Wolf said.

Federal act

Lawmakers are working as swiftly as they can to outlaw as many of the synthetic drugs as possible. In July, President Barack Obama signed the Synthetic Drug Abuse Prevention Act of 2012, which classified 26 synthetic drugs as controlled substances.

However, it appears that as quickly as the synthetic drugs are banned, manufacturers tweak the chemical compounds, creating new substances which then fall outside the law, explained Karen Tannert, a chief pharmacist for the Texas Department of State Health Services.

"We've never seen such chameleon chemicals," Tannert said. "It usually takes a lot to create a new chemical entity, and with these it's incredibly easy. This is the first time I've ever seen anything like it."

To address the growing problem, Tannert said more lawmakers, including those in Texas, are crafting legislation to ban whole categories of chemicals as well as modifications to those compounds.

For now, officials say the best way to combat synthetic drugs is to educate the public that the substances, even if legal, are very dangerous.

"With things changing so rapidly, there's no way to know that something is safe," Samms said. "Even if someone is telling you it's safe."

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