

## Synthetic marijuana available in stores



David Crigger/Bristol Herald Courier - K 2

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Published: September 11, 2010

In a five minute span Wednesday afternoon, two young men walked into a new incense shop on the Virginia side of West State Street and asked for the herbal kind behind the counter. Depending on the brand and scent of their choosing, they were charged between \$18 and \$30, were never carded and went on their way with packets of smelly herbs snug in their pockets.

The first man, a well-dressed twenty-something, demurred, winked slyly, then declined to comment on what he planned to do with it. But the latter, who called himself Jason “don’t worry about my last name,” was unabashed about his intentions.

“I’m going to smoke it,” he said. “It’s great. It gives you just about as good of a buzz as regular pot, but it doesn’t last as long. And I don’t have to worry about losing my job or going to jail.”

Synthetic marijuana, or “spice” as it’s called, has been inching eastward across the country for several years. The green leaves, sprayed with chemicals, are packaged in shiny foil and marketed as “herbal incense,” though authorities say it’s nearly always packed into a pipe and smoked for a high similar to marijuana.

Local police said it started appearing in Bristol convenience stores and head shops in late 2009 and, in the past month, “it spread like an epidemic.”

The state of Tennessee reacted quickly, passing legislation banning synthetic cannabinoids, effective July 1, 2010. The state is among 11 others that have made the drugs illegal, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

But in Virginia, spice is completely legal and entirely unregulated.

“My 12-year-old daughter asked me for money to go buy some,” said Lawrence Faidley, whose daughter goes to Virginia Middle School. “But it’s not just her. It’s all the kids. If my daughter knows about it, then everybody else does, too. And if it gets them high, there’s got to be something in it.”

Synthetic pot, considered a “designer drug,” is most popular among teenagers and people in their early 20s, according to a 2010 study published in the medical journal Toxicology Letters. “Spice products are designed for youngsters that are willing to try cannabis, but are afraid of the judicial consequences and/or the reputation of the narcotics scene,” the report states. “The trap is that these products might be the first step towards drugs of abuse.”

Jason, at Up In Smoke Incense on West State Street, bought the brand Black Widow, pineapple flavored. Up in Smoke manager Rio Calvin corrected him. They are scents, not flavors, he said. Because the incense, as the bags state, are “for meditation purposes only. Not for human consumption.”

Behind him are colorful packages with brand names such as K2, the Happy Shaman, Serenity Now and Green House Effect. They come in flavors, scents rather, from “bubble gum” to “sex.”

“I sell incense,” Calvin said. “If I sell you a necklace and you go home and smoke it and get sick, don’t come crying here.”

Up In Smoke sells a couple hundred dollars worth a day. Demand is not the issue, Calvin said. Competition is.

“There’s 100 different vendors here now,” he said. “They’ve got it in gas stations. It’s crazy.”

All across town, convenience stores have signs on their doors reading: “K2 for sale here!”

The Bristol Herald Courier bought three grams of K2 Summit for \$31.50 at the Country Boys Food Mart on Lee Highway in Bristol, Va. It’s more expensive than regular pot.

Washington County Sheriff’s Capt. Jack Davidson said the going rate for three grams of marijuana is between \$5 and \$10.

At the Exxon station at Exit 14, there are packages of K2 Blond, for \$29.99, displayed neatly under glass next to \$10 pipes. In August, somebody broke into Exotic Illusions, the adult novelty store next door to Up In Smoke on West State Street, and stole 122 packs of it, worth \$3,950. No one has been charged.

K2 Summit comes in a purple metallic bag with a zippered top. There is no indication of origin. No list of ingredients. The little bits of leaves inside smell something like oregano. They have been sprayed, somewhere, with man-made chemicals mirroring the effects of old-fashioned THC.

“But marijuana does not give you seizures, and seizures have been reported with this,” said Christopher Holstege, medical director of the Blue Ridge Poison Control Center at the University of Virginia School of Medicine. “Do I want my kids, my three teenagers, using it? Absolutely not.”

He lists the known reactions to the drug: seizures, confusion, agitation, racing heart beat, mania, hallucinations, elevated blood pressure.

In 2010, the American Association of Poison Control Centers reports 1,259 cases, spread among 48 states and the District of Columbia, involving adverse symptoms of the synthetic pot, said spokeswoman Jessica Wehrman. That is up from just 14 reports in 2009.

This year, an Iowa teenager reportedly had a panic attack and killed himself after smoking it with his friends, according to news accounts. Last month, an Indiana mother of two died and her family blamed spice.

James Kneff Jr., an emergency room doctor at the Bristol Regional Medical Center, said the hospital hasn't treated anyone known to be suffering the ill effects of fake pot.

But, he said, there's really no way to know. K2 and the other drugs like it don't show up in drug screens. So unless patients admit what brought them there, doctors and nurses probably wouldn't catch it.

"It's an interesting medical quandary," Holstege said. "I'd say we're limited in our knowledge. What are the long-term effects? We don't know the answer to that. There's just so much unknown about it."

What frightens Kneff about the drug is, first, the availability – that anybody with \$20 can buy some. Second, he said, after they do, nobody knows what they're smoking.

"That's the problem with substances like this, is that there is no regulation, no standards for purity," he said. "People put all kinds of stuff into drugs like this. You have no clue what you're getting."

The most popular and studied chemical used in synthetic pot is JWH-018. It was created in 1994 by Dr. John W. Huffman, an organic chemistry research professor at Clemson University. The goal of his research, according to his biography on the university's website, was to develop drugs with a similar effect to marijuana in the treatment of nausea, glaucoma and as appetite stimulants.

But someone with more deviant intentions got a hold of his recipe. JWH-018, named for Huffman's initials, in 2008 became the first synthetic cannabinoid discovered in spice, according to the report in Toxicology Letters. Most synthetic pot now is manufactured in Asia, though no one is certain where or how the manufacturing process takes place.

The chemical is stronger than marijuana, with Drug Enforcement Administration estimates putting it at somewhere between 100 and 800 times more potent.

The DEA calls it a "drug of concern."

"It isn't your dad's pot or your granddad's pot," DEA spokesman Michael Sanders said. "It's really getting to be a really bad deal. It's more dangerous than pot, because you really don't know what's in there."

The problem with legislation, he said, is that by the time you crack down on one compound, like JWH-018, somebody's invented a dozen more to replace them. It leaves law enforcement and legislators "chasing our tails."

In Bristol, Va., Police Detective J. Michael Danser said he's starting to get calls, people leaving him anonymous messages.

"They want me to know that it's being sold in stores," Danser said. "That their kids are getting it and smoking it and getting high. Parents need to be aware of it and what it looks like. Even buy a package just to see."

Kneff, the doctor at Bristol Regional Medical Center, said parents should watch for erratic behavior and changes in mood; for "a good kid who all of a sudden acts differently."

Calvin, the manager of Up In Smoke, said he's not a user, but he's not worried about the health effects. "Kids are stupid," he said. But all of his customers are happy.

Just one street lane south, the stuff is illegal.

But outside the store, signs advertising the cheapest spice in town, tax free, hang in every window atop Grateful Dead T-shirts and mushroom tapestries.

Next door, men are painting the white storefront underneath Exotic Illusions' yellow neon sign. "Herbal Incence," is says in big block, misspelled letters. "K-2, \$15.95," is written in red, "Happy Shaman," in purple, "Posh," in blue, and the list goes on.

Jason, who smoked real pot every day for years until he discovered it's legal cousin, said he could see how kids could hurt themselves.

"Just two or three puffs of this stuff and you're alright," he said. "It's a little more hyper type of buzz than marijuana. That's all I've got to say about this."

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