

The Evolving Dangers of Synthetic Drugs

By Jermaine Galloway

Here's a primer on the threats of synthetic drugs to police officers, fire fighters, teachers, administrators, nurses and other who initially arrive at the scene of an incident.

SYNTHETIC DRUGS – drugs from a clandestine lab – are hitting us hard in every sector of our communities. The drugs do not “stay in their lane.” They impact all socioeconomic levels and ages. We have seen overdoses of young children who stumbled upon the drugs, intentionally took them or thought they were taking something else. We've also seen several teens (and younger) overdose on various synthetics.

So, where are these synthetic drugs coming from? What is really going on? What should educators and professionals know about these drugs?

SYNTHETIC ARE EASY TO FIND AND PURCHASE

Most synthetic drugs are coming to the United States from labs in China, with a few other countries contributing. There are several websites that give a person access to purchasing directly from China for “products” or “research chemicals.”

For those not purchasing directly from China, there are plenty of online advertisements selling these drugs. A simple search will reveal an overwhelming number of online drug dealers willing to sell synthetic drugs to anyone. These drugs are frequently labeled as research chemicals, but it's unlikely that an individual would see that label at first glance because many of the packages are shipped discreetly (a common occurrence with drugs and drug paraphernalia).

WHAT DO SYNTHETICS LOOK LIKE?

Some synthetic drugs include fentanyl, carfentanil, various fentanyl-like drugs, MDMA (Ecstasy) and U-47700. Once the drug arrives in America, the drug is consumed through various methods, cut with other drugs or laced onto other drugs, depending on who receives it.

For instance, there are multiple cases of synthetic drugs laced onto marijuana. Many people ask what laced marijuana or methamphetamine look like. The answer? They look like marijuana or methamphetamine.

A state trooper attending one of my recent classes told me about an arrest he had made for marijuana wax. Once tested, the wax came back positive for methamphetamine. During his investigation, his suspect stated that she heats up her marijuana wax (for more information, see Drug Trend Alert: Marijuana Wax, Oil, or Concentrates, which can be found on CampusSafetyMagazine.com) and adds methamphetamine. When questioned, she replied that “by adding methamphetamine, she can vape the wax and no one knows!”

Basically, any drug can be added to different products, and some of these products already include other drugs (including other synthetics).

FIRST RESPONDERS RUN RISK OF ACCIDENTAL OVERDOSES

The packaging, transportation, storage, and use of synthetics are a potential public safety hazard to anyone who comes into contact with these drugs. This can especially affect first responders. We have seen a multitude of synthetic drug overdose cases in the past few months.

Generally, when a person hears the term “first responder” they think of police, fire, and emergency medical personnel. However, the term actually refers to the first person to who up and offer aid. That could make the math teacher, basketball coach, nurse or school administrator a first responder if they get there before the school resource officer or any other local law enforcement personnel.

First responders can accidentally come in contact with these drugs and overdose through handling brushing up against these drugs, or just breathing in the dust of the drugs. A good rule of thumb when responding to a situation where you suspect drugs are involved is to always wear nitrile gloves, respiratory masks and long sleeves.

GET TRAINED ON THE RISKS

A question I frequently ask in my trainings is “Have you trained your staff on the current dangers of synthetic drugs?” It is rare that a week goes by and I don’t receive some type of message from a first responder about locating synthetics or information regarding synthetics in their community.

The symptoms of synthetic drug use or an overdose include seizures, hallucinations, suicidal tendencies, homicidal tendencies, delusions, over-stimulation, aggression, paranoia, chest pain, heart attack, death, over-heating, and other self-destructive behaviors. Symptoms can last for hours or even days.

Commonly, synthetic drugs are combined with other synthetic drugs (K2, Spice, etc.) and sometimes several opioids (fentanyl, heroin, etc). The combinations can be deadly.

Due to the easy accessibility and direct shipping, anyone can acquire various synthetic drugs. There are multiple cases of young teens ordering synthetics off the internet and having them directly shipped to their homes, ending in fatalities.

As we move forward, it is important to be aware of the dangers of synthetics and of their easy accessibility – anyone can acquire them and anyone can be affected by them if they accidentally come into contact with them. Stay educated on how to keep yourself safe.

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