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Undercover investigation: Dangerous synthetic drugs sold to teens at Louisville shops

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By [Antoinette Konz](#) and [Tamara Evans](#)

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (WDRB) – The call came late at night. Her son was in an ambulance on the way to Kosair Children's Hospital after he became violently ill and started having seizures.

Earlier that night, the teenager had been among friends passing around a small bottle with a dropper. Some smoked the liquid in an e-cigarette; others placed a few drops on their tongues, then sipped an energy drink.

The blue-labeled bottle called "Cloud Nine" contained a substance that police and doctors say is increasingly linked to overdoses, seizures, aggression and suicidal behavior in the Louisville area.

"He never saw the bottle, they had just put it onto his tongue," said the Louisville mother, who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "It happened very quickly. He had an immediate reaction. His heart rate dropped, his oxygen levels dropped – he could have died."

The incident this summer was among the latest involving the over-the-counter substances also known as "liquid spice" and marketed with names like "Bizarro," "Mr. Nice Guy" and "Cloud Nine."

These substances often contain components chemically similar to THC -- the active ingredient in marijuana -- but are more dangerous than pot, and manufacturers are constantly creating new products to circumvent the laws designed to ban them, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

And even though the substances are illegal, it's not hard for teens to buy them in Louisville.

In July, WDRB News twice purchased vials of "Bizarro" from Shop Today Smoke Shop in Hikes Point – once using a 17-year-old, and a second time using a reporter posing as a regular customer. Lab tests showed the vials contained AB-PINACA, a chemical banned by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency last year because it can cause hallucinations and racing heartbeats, among other ill effects.

After a subsequent police raid, the owner of the smoke shop is now facing charges including drug trafficking.

Arrests for synthetic drug charges have been on the rise for at least four years, according to LMPD statistics. Last year, police made 253 arrests, up from 73 in 2011. Police are on track for even more arrests this year, with 164 through June 17.

Indeed, liquid synthetic cannabinoids have become a "big issue" in area middle and high schools, said Martin Redd, the DEA's Louisville district group supervisor.

"Kids are starting to experiment with it and it's very, very dangerous," Redd said. "And I am quite certain that a majority of parents have either never heard of it, or they probably don't think their kids are doing it."

Dr. Amy Hanson, an emergency medicine physician with Kosair Children's Hospital and University of Louisville Physicians, said she has seen an uptick in high-school-aged patients seeking emergency treatment after ingesting the drugs.

"I have seen a number of patients just in the last few months," Hanson said. "Prior to that, I had not seen any with these types of ingestions."

Synthetic cannabinoids first got the attention of doctors and public health officials about five years ago, but the number of local cases had been "fairly consistent" until earlier this year, said Ashley Webb, director of the Kentucky Regional Poison Control Center.

"In May and April, several poison centers, us included, saw a huge increase in the number of exposures that we were getting called for," she said. "So this year, we've already seen nearly as many calls halfway through the year as we saw for all of last year."

Aside from being cheap and easily obtainable, most liquid synthetic cannabinoids do not show up in common drug tests, said Lt. J.T. Duncan of LMPD's narcotics unit.

"There is also a misconception that it's safer than marijuana," Duncan said. "That's simply not true. It doesn't act the same way as marijuana does, and is much more concerning for us."

'Like a nightmare'

In May, emergency crews were dispatched to Meade County High School in Brandenburg because several students had become ill after ingesting the substance, Sheriff Butch Kerrick said.

"It was like a nightmare, a dream that I wish had come untrue," Kerrick said.

Kerrick said a student put a liquid into an e-cigarette and passed it around to friends at school.

"They were nauseated, vomiting, headaches, aches, pain and discoloration," Kerrick said.

Authorities initially said the investigation led them to the Dongar Food Mart on Brandenburg Road, which resulted in a raid where Kerrick said police confiscated 21 bottles of a liquid hidden in containers and sent it off for testing.

Five students were taken to the hospital and the teen who allegedly provided the drug was arrested.

The six teens were charged with possession of a controlled substance. In addition, the teen who allegedly passed it around was charged with five counts of wanton endangerment.

All of the cases are pending in juvenile court.

Kerrick said he insisted on charging all of the teens involved in the incident.

"We made a lot of parents mad, but I'm not going to slap their hand and turn them loose and say, 'You made a bad choice,'" Kerrick said. "They weren't forced to do this; they knew what they were doing. We have to wake them up. They've got to learn."

The gas station's manager, Amit Patel, was charged with felony criminal simulation and two misdemeanors -- trafficking in synthetic drugs and delivery/manufacturing drug paraphernalia. His charges remain pending.

Smoke shop twice sold substance

Though the DEA banned products with AB-PINICA last year, they're relatively easy to obtain in Louisville.

At the request of WDRB News, a local high school student visited eight smoke shops and convenience stores in the area looking for Bizarro or Cloud 9.

The 17-year-old was turned down six times before he walked into the Shop Today Smoke Shop on Hunsinger Lane in Hikes Point. After the teen asked for Bizarro, a clerk retrieved a bottle of it from behind the counter and sold it for \$25.

A week later, WDRB News sent reporter Tamara Evans with a hidden camera into the same shop. She was able to buy a bottle of Bizarro for the same price.

The station then had the bottles tested at a California laboratory, which confirmed they contained AB-PINACA. In 2014, there were at least six deaths in Michigan linked to this substance, Webb said.

At the start of its six-month investigation, WDRB alerted authorities that it planned to buy illegal drugs as part of the station's reporting. Aware of the station's work, the DEA also made undercover buys at Shop Today Smoke Shop and found the liquid contained the illegal ingredients.

Then on Oct. 13, Louisville Metro Police raided the smoke shop and three others that police say are owned by Mohammad Faory and his family members. LMPD had been investigating the shop since June after a complaint of illegal activity. In addition to the four businesses, police also searched two Louisville residences.

"We recovered some liquid spice, some solid spice, a large amount of cash and some firearms," said LMPD Det. Steve Healey.

Police charged Mohammad Faory, Fadi Faquri, Thamir Faory, Shadi AlFaouri and Mohammed Kassim with engaging in an organized criminal syndication and felony criminal simulation first degree and trafficking in synthetic narcotics and possession of drug paraphernalia.

More charges are expected to be brought against these five suspects, Healey said, and more people are involved and could also face charges.

Attorneys representing Mohammad Faory and Kassim Mohammed told WDRB their clients are innocent.

Clark Baird, an attorney representing Shadi AlFaouri, also said his client is innocent and argued the law is confusing.

"The statute the commonwealth is using to charge my client is technical mumbo jumbo that no ordinary person could comprehend," Baird said Wednesday.

Calls to attorneys representing Fadi Faquri and Thamir Faory were not immediately returned.

Fake soda cans, other paraphernalia

Healey said not only are teens finding the illegal drugs locally -- they are also using fake soda cans, energy drinks, water bottles and other paraphernalia to help them hide it from family and friends.

"It looks like a regular can of soda," Healey said, displaying what looks to be a normal can of Dr. Pepper. "But when you screw the top off of it, you can conceal your narcotics in there."

Healey and Duncan, as well as local DEA agents, say it highlights a bigger problem.

"This is very prevalent in our community," Healey said. "There are several smoke shops in the Louisville area that we have already executed search warrants on, have shut down, have made arrests on and have gotten convictions on."

Healey said he is working with Louisville Metro Councilman David James to modify metro government's public nuisance ordinance to make it easier for city officials to shut down shops selling synthetic drugs.

James said parents and community members have come to him with concerns about teenagers getting their hands on the illegal substances at the smoke shops.

"It has become very problematic and these synthetic drugs are very dangerous to our kids and our citizens," James, a former police officer, said in an interview Tuesday. "We are looking for a way to add more teeth in our ability to deal with these businesses."

The ordinance change was passed by committee on Monday and will be up for approval by the full Louisville Metro Council on Thursday.

Education important, officials say

Redd said the DEA is also working hard to combat the illegal substances.

"Once we get a formula regulated, all they do is change a few ingredients," he said. "It is very easy for them to manipulate the ingredients. They change the packaging, change the names and often, we are back to where we started."

Redd said teens need to be better educated on the risks of consuming the substances.

"This has really taken hold of our youth," he said. "And unlike many other drugs out there, there just isn't a lot of information out there about this stuff."

Priscilla McIntosh, chief executive officer of The Morton Center, a Louisville non-profit that provides support for individuals and family members struggling with substance abuse, said her organization has also seen an increase in the services it provides to adolescents.

"Kids and teens are discovering these new ways to take drugs – what they don't understand is how deadly it can be," she said. "And in many cases, kids are not aware of the possibility of addiction in their families."

McIntosh said synthetic drugs are often packaged with the words "not for human consumption" and teens think that because the substance can be made at home or they can get it from a friend, it's safe.

"The cost of these drugs is very low, so the chance of them trying it again is very high," she said. "And if they didn't have a bad reaction the first time, they probably felt good and they will likely try it again."

McIntosh said parents and schools must be vigilant.

"You can't just walk in and tell them not to do drugs," she said. "We are having very real, age-appropriate conversations about what they are putting into their bodies. Kids think they are going to live forever. They often don't think beyond the moment."

In Meade County, Kerrick said he isn't taking any chances – he will charge anyone who is caught with the illegal substance.

"A death sentence is what it is," Kerrick said. "You're going to experience your high and everything else, but sooner or later it's going to grip you to the extent that you're not going to wake up."

The family whose teenager was hospitalized because of Cloud Nine this summer said they knew very little about the substance before the incident.

"From our perspective, we couldn't have been more involved parents or more open with our children," the Louisville mother says. "The fact that these kids are feeling compelled to do something without fully understanding what it can do to their mind and their body in such a small dose is terrifying."

"We never thought this would happen to our child. This stuff is all over the place – kids you would never think would do this or try this are doing it. There needs to be awareness."

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