

Synthetic drug 'spice' blamed for sickening 41 youths

Drew Taylor, Montgomery Advertiser 8:06 a.m. CDT April 14, 2015



Montgomery Director of Public Safety Chris Murphy holds a discussion, on Monday April 13, 2015, about the dangers of the drug Spice and its increase in use in the community. (Mickey Welsh / Montgomery Advertiser)



(Photo: File)

Local law enforcement is bracing for what it believes may be a serious problem in the community: synthetic drugs.

On Monday, members of the Montgomery Police Department, Montgomery Fire Department and Montgomery County District Attorney's Office held a meeting urging the public to be wary of synthetic marijuana, also known as "spice."

Between Thursday and Monday, there were 41 different cases of young people becoming sick after ingesting or inhaling the drug, including four Montgomery students on Monday. A majority of these people were transported to the hospital, according to Stanley Cooper, assistant fire chief for the MFD.

"We're very concerned because we are getting a tremendous increase over the last three or four days, and that worries us," said Chris Murphy, director of public safety for Montgomery. "What we want to get out to parents is that don't mistake this as not dangerous; it's actually more dangerous than some drugs because you don't know what you're getting."

"Spice" is part of a group of drugs known as "designer drugs," meaning it was completely manufactured and includes no natural ingredients. There were approximately 11,406 people sent to the emergency room in 2010 because of health problems caused by the drug, according to the Drug Abuse Warning Network. Side effects include raised blood pressure, blood-shot eyes, hallucinations, vomiting and possible psychotic episodes.

"We had a principal this morning describe a student that seemed loopy and had really bloodshot eyes more so than anything else," Murphy said. "There was another situation where someone was running naked in the street."

Maj. Scott Simmons of the MPD said what makes "spice" dangerous is that each package could have a different chemical makeup. Prolonged use of synthetics drugs could result in death.

"It's virtually a garbage can of chemicals put together and you're buying into smoking it," Simmons said.

In October 2011, synthetic marijuana was declared illegal in Alabama. The first weekend it was banned, law enforcement seized 39,500 packages of synthetic marijuana from businesses across Alabama, totaling more than \$3.9 million.

District Attorney Daryl Bailey said that in the past, his office rarely dealt with crimes connected to "spice," but that the number has been rising in the past two or three months in Montgomery and in the county.

"I think that's pretty commonplace across the state of Alabama right now," Bailey said.

Tom Salter, senior communication officer with Montgomery Public Schools, confirmed that there were a couple of ambulances that went to schools Monday, but that he couldn't speak with any certainty about what the issues were. He also said drug dogs searched three undisclosed Montgomery high schools and turned up no illegal drugs.

"The important thing to remember is that this didn't start in the schools," Salter said. "This is a much wider issue than that."

Salter said MPS officials have informed teachers about synthetic marijuana and have asked them to be vigilant about any students who may be using it. Salter said the schools would continue to cooperate with law enforcement and that he expected them to do more searches in the future.

"We fully expect them to, and we are hopeful that law enforcement will do further searches because we want to make sure that mess does not become an issue inside the schools," he said.

Simmons said they have received little cooperation from "spice" users in terms of finding out where it is coming from.

"It's not about arresting someone or getting someone in trouble," he said. "We want to know where this came from to prevent anybody from getting sick before we do have someone end up dying."

Anyone with information on the recent number of synthetic marijuana cases is encouraged to call 625-4700.

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