March 31, 2010

For more information, contact:
Nancy Beals or Julie Saetre
317-254-2815

SYNTHETIC FORM OF MARIJUANA AVAILABLE TO MINORS IN INDIANA

Drug Free Marion County is alerting parents, guardians and those who work with youth about a new synthetic form of marijuana -- often sold under the brand names K2 or Spice – that is finding its way into the hands of Indiana youth.

Available legally and marketed as a dried herbal blend for use as incense, it is more commonly smoked because it produces a high that mimics marijuana. Unlike marijuana, however, it does not contain the psychoactive chemical tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Instead, the herbs have been sprayed or coated with synthetic chemicals that replicate THC's effects. Users can experience a range of side effects, including delusions, panic attacks, vomiting, heart palpitations, agitation and dilated pupils.

According to a recent report by CNN, one healthy teen boy in Georgia even lapsed into a coma after using the herbal mix (he has since recovered).

K2, Spice and other brands of this herbal blend are manufactured in China. The Drug Enforcement Agency began receiving reports of use and abuse in the U.S. last year.

A spokesperson for the Drug Enforcement Agency told CNN that, because products such as K2 and Spice are not manufactured in a controlled environment, those who use them "are playing Russian roulette."

The two main chemicals in these blends -- JWH-018 and JWH-073 -- were invented in 1995 by Dr. John Huffman of Clemson University, who was conducting research into the effects of cannabinoids on the brain. (He found no positive results; only negative side effects.) Because these chemicals are not regulated by the United States, K2 and similar products are legal and available to minors -- making them easier to obtain than cigarettes.

Huffman himself warned against their use in a November 2009 interview with the student newspaper of the University of Kansas. He told the reporter, "The problem with JWH-018 is that absolutely nothing is known regarding its toxicity or metabolites. Therefore, it is potentially dangerous and should not be used."

Other countries and states have begun to recognize the health concerns raised about these blends. According to the CNN report, K2 has been banned in Britain, Germany, Poland, South Korea, Russia and France internationally; in early March, Kansas became the first state in the U.S. to ban the product. Similar legislation is being considered in Kentucky, Illinois, Georgia, Missouri, Tennessee, Utah and North Dakota.

While K2 and Spice are the most well-known names, these products also are manufactured under such titles as Genie, Blaze, Red X Dawn and Zohai. And they are readily available.

A quick Internet search revealed an ad for K2 in a free Indianapolis publication, with the Indiana-based advertiser offering "ready to ship" blends and "local pickup available."

Sellers also market the product through social networking sites such as Facebook, where they maintain pages devoted to their products. One seller's page included the pitch "Hey!!! Now you can get K2 anytime you want at some great prices!! Check out the new website!! Tell us what you think!! And tell your friends!!"

Drug Free Marion County urges parents, guardians and those who work with youth to discuss the risks and dangers of use with the children, tweens and teens in their lives. For more information, contact Nancy Beals at 317-254-2815 or nbeals@drugfreemc.org.

Drug Free Marion County – a not-for-profit organization – plans, promotes, implements and coordinates community efforts to prevent and reduce the abuse of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs among youth and adults.

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