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“Bath Salts”: Dangerous New Synthetic Drug

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Bath salts, a new “designer drug” (drugs created or marketed to get around drug laws), are spreading their poison in communities throughout Arizona and introducing new dangers to our children. Parents and young people must be warned of the extreme risks associated with what may appear to be “legal” substances. Our state legislature must timely act to get ahead of this insidious drug, rather than scramble to catch up to its devastation as we did with methamphetamine.

Not a bathing product, “bath salts” are a lab-created, synthetic drug readily available at convenience stores, head shops or online. Packages clearly marked “not for human consumption” are sold under pleasant-sounding names like Vanilla Sky, Ivory Wave and White Girl for \$25 to \$50. In many cases, the effects of these drugs are anything but pleasant, landing users in the hospital with life-threatening symptoms.

A Verde Valley mother, who wishes to remain anonymous, almost lost her teenage daughter to bath salts about two months ago. She says, “The drug is a horrible, horrible thing. It changed my daughter drastically, mentally and physically. She lost 35 pounds. She was bleeding from her nose and ears. People justify it because it is legal, but it is worse than meth.”

Bath salts are ingested through snorting, injection or smoking to get a “high” similar to methamphetamine or cocaine. The side effects are unpredictable, and unknown to emergency room doctors and psychiatric wards who have no research to guide treatment.

This synthetic drug affects the central nervous system causing a rapid heart rate (which may lead to heart attacks and strokes), chest pains, nosebleeds, sweating and nausea or vomiting. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) has reports of agitation, insomnia, irritability, dizziness, depression, paranoia, delusions, suicidal thoughts, seizures, and panic attacks. Also common are impaired perception of reality, reduced motor control and inability to think clearly.

According to Sergeant James Gregory, a Prescott Valley police officer who supervises Yavapai County’s multi-agency drug task force: “We are seeing the use of bath salts in our day-to-day operations. Interviews with local drug offenders indicate that the effects of bath salts are the same as methamphetamine, but with hallucinations, extreme anger, and uncontrollable physical anxiety. This is definitely an up-and-coming issue that needs to be addressed sooner than later.”

Hospitals are encountering bath salts users suffering from extreme agitation, violence, dangerously high blood pressure and psychotic behaviors. Dr. Frank LoVecchio, a Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center emergency room doctor and medical toxicologist in Phoenix, states, “I had to administer the equivalent to general anesthesia to patients in the intensive care unit in recent weeks. These patients had used bath salts and were so agitated that they did not respond to large doses of sedatives. In my opinion, at least three of these patients would have died without treatment.”

Paranoia lasting months after use is also being reported. Gary Beitel, LCSW, Hospital Administrator for West Yavapai Guidance Clinic’s Windhaven Psychiatric Hospital in Prescott Valley, reports: “The most significant and common effect we see is psychosis related to the injecting of bath salts. Agitation, paranoia and manic behaviors are common. Using bath salts does not seem limited to a certain age range. We are seeing people coming in all age groups experiencing devastating symptoms from the use of this substance.”

Perhaps most disturbing are the unknown risks associated with abuse. No studies have been done to assess the short term effects much less the potential for addiction or the long term physical or mental side effects. With methamphetamines it took several years for the side effects to be fully understood - and we are just now seeing deterioration of the body and long term psychotic paranoia.

Bath salts are banned in 28 states, but remain legal in Arizona. On July 16, 2011, the New York Times reported, “While some states with bans have seen fewer episodes involving bath salts, others where they remain fully legal, like Arizona, are starting to see a surge of cases.”

Now is the time to act, both on an individual basis and as a state. Because of the benign marketing and its legal status, adults and youth alike may not realize the extreme dangers of this drug. Law enforcement professionals from across the state will be urging our legislature to add bath salts to the list of controlled substances and consider alternative ways to be more responsive as designer drugs hit the markets.

Parents talk to your kids and let them know that experimenting with drugs like bath salts, whether legal or illegal, can have tragic consequences for their physical and mental health.