‘We just try to keep people alive.’ Use of dangerous synthetic marijuana growing

BY BETH MUSGRAVE AND MORGAN EADS

On March 28, multiple Lexington police officers and firefighters were called to Phoenix Park in downtown Lexington after it was reported a group of people were overdosing.

Three people were taken to the hospital for suspected overdoses of a synthetic drug that has become increasingly popular with the city’s homeless population.

Synthetic marijuana, also known as serenity, ren, K2 or spice, has been around for a while, but over the past year, Lexington officials have seen an uptick in the drug’s use and the number of people overdosing. It is a synthetic chemical compound created to affect the same parts of the brain as THC, the main mind-altering compound in marijuana.

It’s also trickier to treat than heroin — another illicit drug that has seen a surge in popularity— because there is no antidote to counter the effects of serenity. It’s also cheap.

“It’s cheap to make, easily made, it causes hallucinations, paranoia, some anxiety,” Lexington Police Sgt. Jervis Middleton said. “You frequently see people unclothe themselves, and usually when they come out of it, they don’t remember what they’ve done.”

Serenity can have psychological effects similar to marijuana, but it can also cause increased blood pressure and heart rate, [according to the Drug Enforcement Administration](https://www.dea.gov/druginfo/drug_data_sheets/K2_Spice.pdf). The compound is often sprayed on dried plant material to be smoked or sold as a liquid to be used in an e-cigarette.

People who are using serenity can go into a “standing stupor” for several minutes or, in extreme cases, begin convulsing and vomiting, officer Howard Florence said. Florence is stationed in the downtown entertainment district, where several of the overdoses have been reported. In addition to the March 28 incident, there have been several other incidents where police and fire personnel have been called to parks after several people overdosed on synthetic marijuana at the same time, Florence said.

Steve Polston, the director of the New Life Day Center, a day shelter for the homeless, said a surge in the number of people using synthetic marijuana began about nine months ago.

“There was a wave that hit us — and it seemed to come out of left field — we did not see it coming,” Polston said.

The drug seemed to be everywhere. It was potent and scary, Polston said. People who use it “zombie” out or have seizures, sometimes violent ones, he said.

“Have you seen an Egyptian mummy? That's what they look like,” he said.

Polston said the drug and its effects were so bad, the shelter cooperated with Lexington police. Shelter workers helped track down known serenity or synthetic marijuana dealers. Police did a raid. Many dealers were arrested.

Since that raid, New Life hasn’t seen as many users.

“That doesn't mean the problem went away, it just moved somewhere else,” Polston said.

Ginny Ramsey, the co-founder of the Catholic Action Center, another day shelter for the homeless, said she too has seen more poor and homeless people turning to synthetic drugs. She knows people who have been taken to the hospital because of the seizures the drug causes. She was also told that a man who frequently smoked synthetic marijuana was found dead — possibly of a heart attack — in mid-March in front of what was once the employment office on High Street.

Lexington Police Chief Mark Barnard said last week the drug's low price — as little as $2 per dose — has made it popular. Police are concerned about panhandlers, in particular, using donations to buy the drug.

“The population that tends to abuse it downtown can be in their 20s or they can be in their 50s or 60s,” Florence said. “They’re just looking for something, some drug to use.”

Barnard said the problem with synthetic drugs like serenity is the drug doesn’t leave users’ bodies. The toxic substances build up.

“It’s stored in the fat cells,” Barnard said.

The state legislature in 2016 passed a law to increase penalties for people convicted of dealing synthetic drugs. Middleton said after the state passed laws making synthetic marijuana illegal, there was a decrease in its use. But in the last six months, another spike occurred.

Middleton said the police narcotics unit is working to find synthetic drug suppliers. The police are targeting dealers, not addicts.

Because it’s so difficult to detect, accurate data on overdoses and abuse of synthetic marijuana is difficult to find.

The number of suspected synthetic marijuana overdoses changes based on supply and other factors, Lexington Fire Battalion Chief Brian Wood said. The overdoses are difficult to diagnose and track.

A synthetic marijuana overdose doesn’t look like a heroin overdose; it appears similar to reactions to methamphetamine or bath salts, another synthetic drug, Wood said. While the effects of heroin overdoses can be reversed with naloxone or Narcan, there is nothing available to reverse the effects of serenity.

The number of naloxone doses administered helps the fire department track the heroin problem, Wood said. Without an equivalent way to measure synthetic marijuana use, it’s difficult to monitor.

Paramedics can’t identify a synthetic marijuana overdose in the field unless they’re told by a witness that the patient had been using the drug. They treat the symptoms individually.

“We just try to keep people alive,” Wood said.

Mike Wynn, a spokesman for the Kentucky Justice and Public Safety Cabinet, said the medical examiner’s office has not reported any overdoses from synthetic marijuana so far this year. But that doesn’t mean people aren’t dying from the drug.

“Their numbers often lag behind law enforcement, which operates on the front lines,” said Wynn.

Doctors at one of Lexington’s busiest emergency rooms say they have seen an increase in the number of people coming to the hospital after smoking synthetic marijuana.

“We have seen several cases lately of patients presenting in various degrees of distress related to what they report as synthetic marijuana use,” said Dr. Roger Humphries, chairman of Emergency Medicine at University of Kentucky Health Care. “The strange thing about this drug exposure is that the patients can experience a wide spectrum of symptoms.”

Sometimes people are extremely agitated. Others are unresponsive, Humphries said.

“A relatively small percentage of the patients have life-threatening conditions and are admitted to the ICU from the ED but most are observed for a few hours and are discharged to home after they have recovered from the acute intoxication,” Humphries said.

Although the drug’s street name is serenity, it’s anything but, police and fire officials warn.

“Anytime you use a substance that’s not regulated, you’re taking a chance with your life,” Lexington Fire Battalion Chief Joe Best said.

 FILE - This Aug. 7, 2015, file photo provided by the New York Police Department shows packets of synthetic marijuana, known as K-2, on display in New York after they were seized in Brooklyn. Lexington Police and Firefighters say the synthetic drug is becoming increasingly popular with the city’s homeless population. **New York Police Department** AP