

High on spice

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A herbal product sold in Butte is creating a buzz in town - both figuratively and literally.

It's a legal substance known as "Spice," but it's getting an infamous reputation here and around the country as a synthetic alternative to marijuana.

Spice can give the user a high similar to marijuana when smoked, according to media reports.

Though the product can be legally sold and possessed in Montana, law enforcement and community leaders in Butte are concerned that Spice may be abused and are questioning its long-term effects.

Some states have banned the sale of the Spice and others are considering listing it as a controlled substance, thus making it illegal. Nearly 20 states have banned synthetic marijuana. On Oct. 15, Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter signed a temporary order that would add synthetic ingredients commonly found in Spice to Idaho's list of controlled substances.

Butte Sheriff John Walsh raised the topic at a recent meeting of the Butte-Silver Bow DUI Task Force. The sheriff said he attended a statewide law enforcement meeting in Bozeman earlier this month where Department of Justice officials expressed concern about this product. That department plans to propose that legislators consider enacting laws that would label this product a controlled substance preventing it from being sold legally, Walsh said.

"There's concern (Spice) could be a problem in the future," the sheriff said.

Spice is often sold in small packets consisting of an herbal blend of plant products. The herbs are treated with a synthetic product similar to tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, which is the substance in marijuana that gets people high. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the use of Spice can cause hallucinations, nausea, elevated blood pressure, vomiting and short-term memory loss.

Spice, which also goes by the name of K2, has been around since the mid-1990s. The name "Spice" may have come from a fictional drug referenced in the popular science fiction series "Dune," written by Frank Herbert, according to media reports.

The Community, Counseling and Correctional Services in Butte is taking a stern stand against Spice. The CCCS, which runs the Butte Pre-Release Center and Women's Transitional Center, has listed the product as contraband and its inmates and clients will be disciplined if they are found with it or test positive for its consumption.

Jay Grant, CCCS program administrator, said the program recently adopted a zero tolerance policy on Spice. In a statement issued to The Montana Standard Wednesday, CCCS will continue to "aggressively deal with this issue" and discipline clients who violate the policy.

"These (CCCS) programs view Spice as a contraband item ... Those residents caught using Spice are removed from the program and sent to a higher level of custody," according to the release.

Grant told The Standard that CCCS administrators became aware of the use of Spice among residents about six months ago. In the past few weeks, Grant said the use of this product has declined since officials began urine testing for it. CCCS didn't provide an exact number of people that tested positive for Spice use.

A product of Spice made by Golden Eye can be purchased at businesses in Butte for about \$25 for a one gram package - about the size of a small package of Kool-Aid. A brand of Spice called "Golden Eye" is sold locally and is made by a company called LifeSmart Products, of Los Angeles. The package cautions that the product is for use as incense only, and not for human consumption, and can only be sold to those 18 or older.

Glenn Erickson, owner of Gilligan's Tobacco Shop, 916 E. Front St., said Wednesday that his store doesn't sell Spice, but added that he will likely be selling a brand of the product within the next week.

"There is such a huge demand for it," he said.

Erickson said that within the past eight months, his store has been heavily solicited by companies asking him to carry their Spice product. He said he'll choose a brand that he believes is safe.

Erickson added that people under 18 aren't allowed in his store, and he won't sell the product to minors.

Cyndi Vitcovich, a licensed addition counselor with the Butte-Silver Bow Health Department, said she hasn't heard any cases of local youths using Spice. Vitcovich, who counsels kids 11 to 18 with substance abuse problems, said she would be concerned if people are using this product as a substitute for marijuana.

"No (marijuana) alternatives are good for people in treatment for substance abuse," she said.

Vitcovich added that she cautions anyone from using a synthetic product for recreational drug use.

"You have no idea what's going to happen in the long run ... what it's going to do to your body," she said.