Synthetic marijuana a growing trend among teens, authorities say…

By Sarah Aarthun, CNN

The latest trend at teen parties isn't warm beer or prescription medicines pilfered from parents' medicine cabinets. Instead, increasing numbers of youths are turning to an herb-based product to get high, and unlike marijuana, it's perfectly legal.

What is "synthetic marijuana"? It's known as K2 or Spice, a synthetic substance that, when smoked, gives users a marijuana-like high, according to drug authorities. Its growing popularity is causing increasing alarm among health care professionals, law enforcement authorities and lawmakers, with one Drug Enforcement Agency official calling its use the equivalent of "playing Russian roulette."

Manufactured in Asia and sold online or in local stores, K2 and similar substances are marketed as herbal incense. A disclaimer on a K2-selling Web site reads: "K2Herbal products are novelty incenses and are not for consumption."

Sold in various flavors in 3-gram bags, the product consists of herbs that are sprayed with synthetic substances that mimic THC, the high-causing natural chemical found in marijuana.

Health and drug officials say the danger in using such products is the unregulated nature of their production and makeup.

What is the concern? "Our biggest concern is that this particular chemical is likely manufactured in a dorm-room setting. And these dorm-room scientists are not going to be exhibiting a lot of quality assurance techniques," says Dr. Gaylord Lopez, a toxicologist and head of the Georgia Poison Center.

As a result, there's a potential for users to inhale contaminants along with the substance they think they're smoking, Lopez said, which may be a contributing factor in the adverse symptoms some of its users have been experiencing.

"Synthetic drugs and herbal drug products like Spice and K2 are not made in a controlled environment and thus you are playing Russian roulette when it comes to these types of products," said Dawn Dearden, a spokeswoman for the DEA, which first began receiving reports about abuse of the substance last year. "There is no way, outside of a controlled laboratory environment, to determine the chemical makeup, synthetic ingredients or amounts, and therefore there is no way to determine with any accuracy what the potentially harmful effects may be."

Lopez says his center first heard of the substance in December when Georgia hospitals began reporting patients who had used K2 or Spice.