SYNTHEIC CANNABINOIDS: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

WHAT ARE THEY?
“K2” or “Spice” refers to hundreds of synthetic cannabinoids — herbal and chemical mixtures which may produce experiences similar to marijuana. These substances can be smoked or vaporized and inhaled with e-cigarette devices. Smokeable forms contain mixtures of dried, shredded plant material and chemical additives that cause their mind-altering effects.

Although they are marketed as safe, these substances often contain banned chemicals which makes them illegal Schedule I drugs, and a risky proposition.

WHAT DO THEY DO?
People who use synthetic cannabinoids report experiences similar to those produced by marijuana: elevated mood, relaxation, and altered perception. However, in some cases the effects are up to 100 times stronger than those of marijuana. Since 2015, there have been more than 6,000 synthetic cannabinoid-related emergency department visits in NYC, and that number is growing.

Users who seek help from Poison Control Centers report symptoms that include rapid heart rate, vomiting, agitation, confusion, and hallucinations. K2 can also raise blood pressure and cause reduced blood supply to the heart (myocardial ischemia), acute kidney failure, and in a few cases it has been associated with heart attacks and death.

The bottom line is that these products often contain unregulated and potentially very dangerous chemicals and substances, and their effects are more inconsistent than those of marijuana.

If you or someone you know has a problem with K2, see Substance Abuse and Addiction Resources and check out the SAFE program offered through NYU Counseling and Wellness Services.

BUT WHAT ABOUT MEDICAL USE?
There are two FDA-approved medications that contain cannabinoid chemicals in pill form: dronabinol and nabilone. These medications are prescribed to treat nausea caused by chemotherapy and to boost appetite in patients with AIDS wasting syndrome. These drugs have been tested for efficacy and their production is overseen by the FDA, unlike the contents of cannabinoids marketed for recreational use.

Sources: NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, National Institute on Drug Abuse, National Institutes of Health, US Department of Health and Human Services