

Herbal Highs are Just as Deadly as Street Drugs

Herbal Highs

“Herbal Highs” are part of a new wave of drugs proclaimed as safer, healthier and legal alternatives to illegal drugs.



On July 2, 2008, a 55-year-old man collapsed at a popular Toronto club after taking a ‘natural’ recreational drug, a form of herbal ecstasy sold as a natural, safer and legal alternative to illicit drugs. He was later pronounced dead in hospital. The next day, at the same venue, a woman collapsed and was rushed to hospital, leaving her in critical condition after ingesting a similar ‘natural, safe and legal’ product.

‘Herbal Highs’ are part of a new wave of drugs proclaimed as safer, healthier and legal alternatives to illegal drugs. These drugs are made of legal products and are available over the counter at many ‘head shops’, as well as online through various Internet wholesalers.

Marketed as non-addictive, safer and legal alternatives, herbal highs claim to produce a euphoric, stimulating feeling similar to that of “ecstasy” without the post-use side-effects or ‘downs’. The most common active ingredient in herbal highs is benzylpiperazine (BZP). Trifluoromethylphenylpiperazine (TFMPP), a hallucinogenic substance similar in its effect to LSD, and ephedrine (EPH) are also common ingredients. BZP is a chemically synthesized, not a naturally occurring substance. BZP, also known as “A2,” “Frenzy” or “Nemesis” among other aliases, is a recreational drug which, acting as a serotonin and dopamine agonist, mimics the effects of MDMA (the active ingredient is the illicit drug “ecstasy”) and amphetamines.

Such natural or herbal recreational drugs go under myriad aliases. Some of the common names are: Herbal E, Herbal X, Yohimbe, Happy Caps, X-Pillz, Cloud9, Herbal Bliss, Ritual Spirit, GWM, Rave Energy and Ultimate Xphoria.

If it's natural, then it must be safe, right?! WRONG! Semi-natural or all-natural compounds simulating the effects of MDMA can be just as dangerous as chemically made compounds.

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The interaction of these chemical combinations produces acclaimed similar effects. While BZP-based drugs are marketed as providing a natural euphoric rush and high, they are not without their dangers. BZP has been reported to produce myriad harmful side-effects and can cause unpredictable and serious toxicity. Just as with the illicit drug "ecstasy," immediate adverse effects may include anxiety, vomiting, headache, palpitations, agitation, dizziness and confusion, collapse and toxic seizures. BZP has also been found to cause toxic paranoid psychosis or exacerbation of existing mental illness. Co-ingesting BZP with MDMA or amphetamines could lead to fatal toxicity.

Growing concerns regarding such natural, healthier and safer alternatives to illicit drugs have raised international concerns over the availability and legality of such recreational drugs. In 2002, the U.S. was one of the first countries to ban BZP, classifying it as a schedule 1 controlled substance. Since then, BZPs have been banned in Australia, Greece, Italy, Malta, Denmark, Sweden and Japan, to name a few.

The U.K. has recently moved to regulate the sale of BZP (available by prescription only), while possession is still legal. In Europe, recommendations from an in-depth risk assessment by various European regulatory, medical and intra-governmental bodies including INTERPOL and EMCDDA drove the EU to classify BZP under control, requesting that all of its community members apply substance of control measures on BZP within one year. Most recently, in April 2008, New Zealand has made the sale of BZP and other piperazine derivatives illegal.

BZP remains legal and uncontrolled in Canada. However, recent fatalities related to the use of 'natural or herbal' recreational drugs have started to catch the attention of Canadian media and health authorities, resulting in a recent advisory by Health Canada warning about the dangers of such so-called 'safe, natural and legal' alternatives to ecstasy on July 10, 2008.

**For more information on CODA's Rx/OTC program, please contact our offices.*

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