

US 'bath salts' ban aimed at violence-linked drugs

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In this Jan. 26, 2011 file photo, containers of bath salts, synthetic stimulants that mimic the effects of traditional drugs like cocaine and speed, sit on a counter at Hemp's Above in Mechanicsburg, Pa. On July 10, 2012, President Obama signed a law banning more than two dozen of the most common chemicals used to make the drugs. Over the past two years health care and law enforcement professionals have seen a surge in use of the drugs, often sold under the guise of bath salts, incense and plant food. (AP Photo/The Patriot-News, Chris Knight)

MANDATORY CREDIT

(AP) — People are inventing so many new, legal ways to get high that U.S. lawmakers can't seem to keep up.

Over the past two years, the country has seen a surge in the use of

synthetic drugs made of legal chemicals that mimic the dangerous effects of cocaine, amphetamines and other illegal stimulants. Some are imported cheaply from China or India.

The drugs are often sold at small, independent stores in misleading packaging that suggests common household items like [bath salts](#), incense and plant food. But the substances inside are powerful, mind-altering drugs that have been linked to bizarre and violent behavior across the country. Law enforcement officials refer to the drugs collectively as "bath salts," though they have nothing in common with the fragrant toiletries used to moisturize skin.

President Barack Obama signed a bill into law earlier this month that bans the sale, production and possession of more than two dozen of the most common bath salt drugs. But health professionals say that there are so many different varieties of the drugs that U.S. lawmakers are merely playing catch up.

"The moment you start to regulate one of them, they'll come out with a variant that sometimes is even more potent," said Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on [Drug](#) Abuse.

There are no back alleys or crack houses in America's latest drug epidemic. The problem involves potent substances that amateur chemists make, package and sell in stores under brands like "Ivory Wave," "Vanilla Sky" and "Bliss" for as little as \$15.

Emergencies related to the drugs have surged. The American Association of Poison Control Centers received more than 6,100 calls about bath salt drugs in 2011 — up from just 304 the year before — and more than 1,700 calls in the first half of 2012.

The problem for lawmakers is that it's difficult to crack down on the

drugs. U.S. laws prohibit the sale or possession of all substances that mimic illegal drugs, but only if federal prosecutors can show that they are intended for human use. People who make bath salts and similar drugs work around this by printing "not for human consumption" on virtually every packet.

Barbara Carreno, a spokeswoman for the Drug Enforcement Agency, said the intended use for bath salts is clear.



In this Friday, Jan. 29, 2011, file photo, packages of fake "bath salts," synthetic stimulants that mimic the effects of traditional drugs like cocaine and speed, are displayed by Senate Drug Policy Committee chairman Sid Albritton, R-Picayune, at the Capitol in Jackson, Miss. On July 10, 2012, President Obama signed a law banning more than two dozen of the most common chemicals used to make the drugs. Over the past two years health care and law enforcement professionals have seen a surge in use of the drugs, often sold under the guise of bath salts, incense and plant food. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis, File)

"Everyone knows these are drugs to get high, including the sellers," she said.

Mark Ryan, director of the Louisiana Poison Center, says there are so many different drugs out there that it's almost impossible to know what

people have ingested, or how long the effects will last.

"Cocaine is cocaine and meth is meth. We know what these things do," he said. "But with these new drugs, every time the chemist alters the chemical structure, all bets are off."

The most common bath salt drugs, like MDPV and mephedrone, were first developed in pharmaceutical research laboratories, though they were never approved for medical use. During the last decade they became popular as party drugs at European raves and dance clubs. As law enforcement began cracking down on the problem there, the drugs spread across the Atlantic.

Poison control centers in the U.S. began tracking use of the drugs in 2010. The majority of the early reports of drug use were clustered in southern states like Louisiana, Tennessee and Kentucky. But the problem soon spread across the country.

The most dangerous synthetic drugs are stimulants that affect levels of both dopamine and serotonin, brain chemicals that affect mood and perception. Users, who typically smoke or snort the powder-based drugs, may experience a surge in energy, fever and delusions of invincibility.

There are no official federal estimates on deaths connected with the drugs, many of which do not show up on typical drug tests. But police reports have implicated the drugs in several cases.

Packets of "Lady Bubbles" bath salts, for instance, were found on Sgt. David Franklyn Stewart last April after the soldier shot and killed his wife and himself during a car chase with law enforcement in Washington state. Another death involving bath salts played out in Louisiana. Police reported that Dickie Sanders shot himself in the head Nov. 11, 2010 while his parents were asleep.

Hospital emergency rooms, doctors and law enforcement agencies across the country have struggled to control bath salt drug users who often are feverish and paranoid that they are being attacked. Doctors say users often turn up naked because bath salts raise their body temperature so much that they strip off their clothing.

Cookeville Regional Medical Center in Tennessee has treated 160 people suspected of taking bath salts since 2010. Dr. Sullivan Smith, who works there, recalls one man who had been running for more than 24 hours because he believed the devil was chasing him with an ax. By the time police brought him to the hospital, he was dehydrated and covered in blood from running through thorny underbrush.

"We're seeing extreme agitation, hallucinations that are very vivid, paranoia and some really violent behavior, so it's a real crisis for us," Smith said. "We sedate the living daylights out of them. And we're talking doses on the order of 10 or 20 times what you would give for a painful procedure."

To control the spread of the problem, the Drug Enforcement Agency issued a temporary ban in October on three of the most common drugs — mephedrone, methylone and MDPV. That ban became permanent under the bill signed by Obama on July 10.

Under the law, anyone convicted of selling, making or possessing 28 synthetic drugs, including bath salts, will face penalties similar to those for dealing traditional drugs like cocaine and heroin.

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