

Rare study of fake pot use among college students

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Credit: Drug Enforcement Agency

A survey of more than 300 college students reveals that college students who use "fake weed" or synthetic THC are most likely to have tried the drug because they were curious.

Rebecca Vidourek, a University of Cincinnati assistant professor of [health promotion](#) and assistant director of the Center for Prevention Science; Keith King, a UC professor of health promotion and director of the Center for Prevention Science; and Michelle Burbage, a graduate

student and graduate assistant for UC's Health Promotion and Education Program, published their findings in the current issue of the *Journal of Drug Education*.

The study found that 17 percent of the students surveyed reported taking synthetic THC at least once in their lifetime. Three percent of those surveyed had reported recent use. "Based on the study's findings, it appears senior year of high school and the first year of college is the primary time for initiating use of THC," write the authors of the study. "Perhaps, targeting middle and [high school students](#) with education programs on the negative effects of THC is needed to prevent initiation and regular use."

Tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC, is the chemical compound that is naturally produced in the cannabis or marijuana plant that results in the relaxation or "high" effect of marijuana users. Synthetic THC – sold under street names such as K2, fake weed, herbal incense, plant food, spice and other names – is produced with chemicals to mimic the effects of THC in the natural form of marijuana. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that the lab chemicals most commonly found in synthetic THC have been defined by the Drug Enforcement Agency as Schedule 1 controlled substances.

However, these lab-manufactured drugs are easy to get, hard to spot in drug tests, and, as a result, they're becoming increasingly popular among young people. The authors say previous research on the use of synthetic THC has centered on the high-school population with limited research on its use among [college students](#).

The authors distributed a three-page [survey](#) that was completed by 338 students in undergraduate and graduate health programs at a public university.

The survey found that the majority of the survey participants had not used synthetic THC – 17.1 percent of respondents reported using synthetic THC at least once in their lifetime. The study's authors report that of those who had tried THC, 19.2 percent reported curiosity as the top reason for trying the substance; 17.4 percent reported using the drug for the purpose of getting high and 10.6 percent reported that the "fun of feeling high" was the main factor contributing to use.

The authors also report that 4 percent had tried THC to "fit in," and 3.8 percent felt they were peer-pressured into trying the drug.

The majority of students who had used the drug also reported that head shops – retail outlets that sell items such as tobacco products, bongs, roach clips and other casual drug-related paraphernalia – were popular places to purchase synthetic THC, followed by friends, tobacco shops, hemp shops, the Internet, gas stations, convenience stores and other locales.

The survey also turned up students reporting negative side effects from using THC, including racing heartbeat, nervousness, paranoia, nausea and headaches.

Study Demographics

The survey sample was just over 59.2 percent female (200 students) and 40.8 percent male (138 students), with ages ranging from 18 to 36. Eighty-one percent of the participants were white; 7.7 percent were African-American; 6 percent were Asian; 3.3 percent identified as "other"; and 1.5 percent reported being Hispanic. The sample included students ranging from freshmen to graduate students.

Researchers found no significant differences in drug use based on when they first tried THC. However, the survey indicated that females were

more likely to try the [drug](#) at a significantly younger age (17.8) than males (18.4). The majority of freshmen and sophomores in the survey who had tried THC began using when they were just over 16 ½. Juniors, seniors and grad [students](#) reported a later initiation age of 18.82 years.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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