'Zombie' outbreak in NYC caused by synthetic cannabinoid

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(HealthDay)—Synthetic cannabis that triggered a "zombie" outbreak in a

New York City neighborhood last summer was significantly more potent than real cannabis, according to a study published online Dec. 14 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

Thirty-three people at a Brooklyn event became intoxicated and essentially immobilized after smoking the synthetic drug. The study focused on 18 of the Brooklyn residents who had serious reactions after smoking AK-47 24 Karat Gold in July. Emergency medical service responders and bystanders characterized the blank stares, groaning, and generally lethargic "mechanical" movements of those who had taken the drug as "zombielike."

Those taken to a hospital for emergency treatment were between 25 and 59 years old. Eight were homeless. Testing of their urine and blood revealed evidence of the synthetic product AK-47 24 Karat Gold. A lab analysis found it was as much as 85 times more potent than tetrahydrocannabinol. Treatment included breathing assistance and heart monitoring.

Synthetic cannabis is highly potent, unregulated, and bears no real relationship to plant-based cannabis, study author Roy Gerona, Ph.D., of the University of California, San Francisco's Clinical Toxicology and Environmental Biomonitoring Laboratory, told *HealthDay*. "What we're talking about are thousands of different synthetic drugs that since 2008 have been put together for their psychoactive effects in clandestine labs all over China," he said.

More information: Abstract
Full Text

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