

Officials fear bath salts are growing drug problem

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FULTON, Miss. — When Neil Brown got high on bath salts, he took his skinning knife and slit his face and stomach repeatedly. Brown survived, but authorities said others haven't been so lucky after snorting, injecting or smoking powders with such innocuous-sounding names as Ivory Snow, Red Dove and Vanilla Sky.

Some said the effects of the powders are as powerful as abusing methamphetamine. Increasingly, law enforcement agents and poison control centers said the bath salts with complex chemical names are an emerging menace in several U.S. states where authorities talk of banning their sale.

From the Deep South to California, emergency calls are being reported over exposure to the stimulants the powders often contain: mephedrone and methylenedioxypyrovalerone, also known as MDPV.

Sold under such names as Ivory Wave, Bliss, White Lightning and Hurricane Charlie, the chemicals can cause hallucinations, paranoia, rapid heart rates and suicidal thoughts, authorities said. The chemicals are in bath salts and even plant foods that are sold legally at convenience stores and on the Internet. However, they aren't necessarily being used for the purposes on the label.

Mississippi lawmakers this week began considering a proposal to ban the sale of the powders, and a similar step is being sought in Kentucky. In Louisiana, the bath salts were outlawed by an emergency order after the state's poison center received more than 125 calls in the last three months of 2010 involving exposure to the chemicals.

In Brown's case, he said he had tried every drug from heroin to crack and was so shaken by terrifying hallucinations that he wrote one Mississippi paper urging people to stay away from the bath salts.

"I couldn't tell you why I did it," Brown said, pointing to his scars. "The psychological effects are still there."

While Brown survived, sheriff's authorities in one Mississippi county said they believe one woman overdosed on bath salts there. In southern Louisiana, the family of a 21-year-old man said he cut his throat and ended his life with a gunshot. Authorities are investigating whether a man charged with capital murder in the December death of a Tippah County, Miss., sheriff's deputy was under the influence of the bath salts.

The stimulants aren't regulated by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, but are facing federal scrutiny. Law officers said some of the substances are being shipped from Europe, but origins still are unclear.

Gary Boggs, an executive assistant at the DEA, said there's a lengthy process to restrict these types of designer chemicals, including reviewing the abuse data. But it's a process that can take years.

Dr. Mark Ryan, director of Louisiana's poison control center, said he thinks state bans on the chemicals can be effective. He said calls about the salts have dropped sharply since Louisiana banned their sale in January.

Ryan said cathinone, the parent substance of the drugs, comes from a plant grown in Africa and is regulated. He said MDPV and mephedrone are made in a lab, and they aren't regulated because they're not marketed for human consumption. The stimulants affect neurotransmitters in the brain, he said.

"It causes intense cravings for it. They'll binge on it three or four days before they show up in an ER. Even though it's a horrible trip, they want to do it again and again," Ryan said.

Ryan said at least 25 states have received calls about exposure, including Nevada and California. He said Louisiana leads with the greatest number of cases at 165, or 48 percent of the U.S. total, followed by Florida with at least 38 calls to its poison center.

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