

Officials: 'Bath salts' are growing drug problem

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In this Jan. 18, 2011 photo, Itawamba County Sheriff Chris Dickinson holds a packet of what is being sold as bath salts at his office in Fulton, Miss. The product, which can be legally purchased, contain stimulants which authorities claim can cause hallucinations, paranoia and suicidal thoughts and are now among the newest substances law enforcement agents are having to deal with in the streets. (AP Photo/Rogelio V. Solis)

(AP) -- When Neil Brown got high on dangerous chemicals sold as bath salts, he took his skinning knife and slit his face and stomach repeatedly. Brown survived, but authorities say others haven't been so lucky after

snorting, injecting or smoking powders with such innocuous-sounding names as Ivory Wave, Red Dove and Vanilla Sky.

Some say the effects of the powders are as powerful as abusing [methamphetamine](#). Increasingly, law enforcement agents and poison control centers say the advertised 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 methylenedioxypropylamphetamine, 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 say. The chemicals are in products sold legally at convenience stores and on the Internet as bath salts and even plant foods. 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 advertised 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 say they believe one woman overdosed on the powders there. In southern Louisiana, the family of a 21-year-old man says 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 say some of the substances are being shipped from Europe, but origins are still 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 chemicals 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.

Dr. Rick Gellar, medical director for the California Poison Control System, said the first call about the substances came in Oct. 5, and a handful of calls have followed since. But he warned: "The only way this won't become a problem in California is if federal regulatory agencies get ahead of the curve. This is a brand new thing." In the Midwest, the Missouri Poison Center at Cardinal Glennon Children's Medical Center received at least 12 calls in the first two weeks of January about teenagers and young adults abusing such chemicals, said Julie Weber, the center's director. The center received eight calls about the powders all of last year.

Dr. Richard Sanders, a general practitioner working in Covington, La., said his son, Dickie, snorted some of the chemicals and endured three days of intermittent delirium. Dickie Sanders missed major arteries when he cut his throat. As he continued to have visions, his physician father tried to calm him. But the elder Sanders said that as he slept, his son went into another room and shot himself.

"If you could see the contortions on his face. It just made him crazy," said Sanders. He added that the coroner's office confirmed the chemicals were detected in his son's blood and urine.

Sanders warns the substances are far more dangerous than some of their brand names imply.

"I think everybody is taking this extremely lightly. As much as we outlawed it in Louisiana, all these kids cross over to Mississippi and buy whatever they want," he said.

A small packet of the chemicals typically costs as little as \$20.

In northern Mississippi's Itawamba County, Sheriff Chris Dickinson said his office has handled about 30 encounters with users of the advertised bath salts in the past two months alone. He said the problem grew last year in his rural area after a Mississippi law began restricting the sale of pseudoephedrine, a key ingredient in making methamphetamine.

Dickinson said most of the bath salt users there have been meth addicts and can be dangerous when using them.

"We had a deputy injured a week ago. They were fighting with a guy who thought they were two devils. That's what makes this drug so dangerous," he said.

But Dickinson said the chemicals are legal for now, leaving him no choice but to slap users with a charge of disorderly conduct, a misdemeanor.

Kentucky state lawmaker John Tilley said he's moving to block the drug's sale there, preparing a bill for consideration when his legislature convenes shortly. Angry that the powders can be bought legally, he said: "If my 12-year-old can go in a store and buy it, that concerns me."

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