

# Media Tip Sheet: Synthetic Cannabinoids



## What is “synthetic marijuana”?

“Synthetic marijuana”, “Spice”, and “K2” are a few common yet misleading terms for a class of substances more accurately called synthetic cannabinoids. Synthetic cannabinoids often act on many of the same receptors in the brain as THC, the active ingredient in marijuana. However, synthetic cannabinoids work more strongly on those receptors, and may contribute to unpleasant effects – like anxiety, increased heart rate, paranoia, and nausea – more often than seen with marijuana use.<sup>1</sup> We urge not using the term “synthetic marijuana” because

it perpetuates the myth that these substances are alike. Similarly, “Spice” and “K2”, popular brand names from when synthetic cannabinoids were still legal, could now refer to any number of different synthetic cannabinoids, each with different and inconsistent effects.

### EXAMPLE PHRASING

**“A man was hospitalized after having a bad reaction from smoking K2, a common term for synthetic cannabinoid products. What’s called “K2” could actually be any one of hundreds of synthetic cannabinoids.”**

## Are synthetic cannabinoids legal?

Synthetic cannabinoid products began appearing mid-2000s, prompting states to pass various laws banning their sale. In 2012, the Synthetic Drug Abuse Prevention Act placed many synthetic cannabinoids into Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act (CSA).<sup>2</sup> However, manufacturers can easily skirt specific bans by making small changes to the chemical formulas, producing newer synthetic cannabinoids that are not yet scheduled. These laws have proven to be ineffective in preventing

risks and reducing rates of usage.<sup>3</sup> Instead, their enforcement disproportionately impacts black and brown communities and drives mass incarceration.

### EXAMPLE PHRASING

**“In practice, federal and state laws banning synthetic cannabinoids do little for prevention while disproportionately impacting communities of color and driving mass incarceration.”**

## Who’s using synthetic cannabinoid products

348 448 488 518 548 578 608 638 668 698 728 758 788 818 848 878 908 938 968 998

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## What can be done to prevent these risks?

criminalized; they need housing, job opportunities, and access to treatment. Also, harm reduction-oriented interventions, such as

In addition to being ineffective, prohibition has contributed to the ever-changing and continuously growing catalog of synthetic cannabinoids available in the unregulated underground market. Alternative approaches to the challenges these substances present include:

### 1. Provide outreach and services for vulnerable populations

Synthetic cannabinoids are most commonly used by those suffering from chaotic life situations, like people struggling with mental health issues, the homeless, and low-income earners. These populations don't need to be