

# The Adverse Effects of BATH SALTS



**Y**our heart beats rapidly as you continue checking your rear-view mirror. With each anxiety-filled pulse, your chest tightens. You press your foot hard on the car's gas pedal — a lead block accelerating you to unsafe speeds. But wrecking your vehicle is the least of your worries. You've got to get away from them.

Hallucinations and severe paranoia are commonplace for abusers of the synthetic drugs more commonly known as "bath salts." Bath salts are marketed as a safe and legal way to get high, but un-

fortunately for those abusing the drugs, neither definition is true.

"I often tell Sailors and Marines that using synthetic drugs, like bath salts, is playing Russian roulette with their health, career, future and possibly life," said Vice Adm. Matthew L. Nathan, U.S. Navy surgeon general and chief, Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. "Sadly, using bath salts is no different from the real game, where a round eventually chambers, and all is lost."

Bath salts, which go by many "street names" including "stardust" and "white rush," are marketed as a legal substitute

for ecstasy, cocaine, and amphetamines. They are powerful stimulant drugs that have been designed to avoid legal prosecution, and are commonly available on the Internet, specialty "smoke shops," and convenience stores.

"Bath salts are a class of designer drugs called synthetic cathinones," said Navy Lt. George Loeffler, chief psychiatry resident, Naval Medical Center San Diego. "They are degenerative compounds very similar to amphetamines."

The health effects from bath salt use can range from agitation, lack of appetite and delusions to kidney failure,

muscle spasms and sever paranoia.

“These substitute cathinones are dangerous compounds — both medically and psychiatrically,” Loeffler said. “Medically, we’ve been seeing patients coming to the emergency department with heart attacks, necrotizing fasciitis (flesh-eating bacteria) and various kinds of brain swelling.”

While the physical effects are certainly dangerous, Loeffler sees many of the drug’s adverse effects from the psychiatric perspective.

“People have described (the use of bath salts) as similar to the PCP (Phencyclidine) epidemic that came out a few decades ago,” Loeffler said. “The individuals who are abusing these compounds can be extremely violent. Sometimes they don’t seem to be aware of any pain that has been inflicted on them. They are agitated, angry and paranoid.”

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, The chemicals in bath salts affect the brain in the same manner as stimulant drugs — causing a high abuse and addiction liability. These products have been reported to trigger intense cravings similar to those experienced by methamphetamine users, and clinical reports from other countries appear to corroborate their addictiveness.

“These patients really crave the substance,” Loeffler said. “These are individuals who use the substance, are treated, and then go out and go right back to abusing it.”

In a survey conducted by TestCountry, a leading supplier of drug testing supplies and services, synthetic drugs such as bath salts are viewed as the third most dangerous drugs for kids in today’s society, behind only methamphetamine/crack and prescription drugs such as painkillers.

Loeffler says that bath salt users are normally admitted to the psychiatric ward for two reasons — depression with suicidal ideation or because they are in a state of severe psychosis.

“Many times they’re thinking that there are evil things or people out there that are trying to do horrible things to them,” Loeffler said. “What’s really concerning about these substances is that even after we get these patients to our inpatient psychiatric ward and we keep them for a couple days, they may stop seeing and hearing things that aren’t

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really there, but they continue to have these beliefs. The paranoid feelings don’t go away with the visions and sounds.”

When Loeffler was a third-year resident, he had a particularly startling encounter with a Sailor who was high on bath salts. The patient was brought to the medical center after being stopped by base security for trying to enter the compound with an assortment of machetes on the passenger seat of his car.

“I got a call in the middle of the night to go and treat an active-duty Sailor who had been admitted to the medical service,” Loeffler said. “I went up to see him and it became clear, pretty quickly, from reading the chart and speaking to him briefly, that he had been using these substances. He was paranoid. He didn’t trust me or anything going on.

The Sailor had moved out of his home due to the paranoid delusions he was experiencing.

“He had taken his girlfriend to a nearby hotel,” Loeffler said. “He believed that there was some secret agency that was watching him and wished to kill him. He saw them running around the roof of his house and trying to break into his apartment.”

Along with the paranoid delusions, another troubling aspect of this Sailor’s addiction was the severe anger that came along with his drug abuse.

“When I went to see him he was very agitated,” Loeffler said. “He wasn’t a big guy, but I was intimidated by him because he was very unpredictable.”

After Loeffler ended his interview with the patient, he announced that he would be admitting him to the psychiatric ward.

“There were probably four or five security guards to escort the patient to our inpatient psychiatric ward,” Loeffler

said. “I left to set up the admission with the charge nurse. The Sailor assaulted the security guards, set off the fire alarm a number of times and almost made it out the door of the fifth floor balcony — and we’re not sure what he would’ve done at that point.”

These substances can damage a service member’s health but they can also destroy a military career that took years of dedication and hard work to build.

“All synthetic drugs are violations of military rules,” said Mike Keleher, division chief, Naval Criminal Investigative Service general crimes directorate. “With the processes in place, service members will be separated for use or possession of these substances.”

The Navy Surgeon General has urged all commanding officers and others in positions of leadership to be fully engaged in their command’s implementation plan to continually communicate and educate all hands as to the Navy’s zero-tolerance policy on designer drug use.

“Each command’s aggressive awareness and education campaign should begin during indoctrination and be reinforced throughout the year,” Nathan said. “We cannot over-communicate this issue. Accountability for those who abuse these substances will help deter their abuse.”

Nathan affirmed that the Navy will continue to highlight the issue of synthetic drug use by delivering sustained and targeted messages throughout the Navy and Marine Corps.

“We will ensure every person representing our armed forces is fully informed of the dangers of synthetic drugs,” Nathan said. “I implore everyone to take care when making decisions about using synthetic drugs. It’s not healthy. It’s not legal. It’s not worth it.” ❖