New designer drugs hit South Florida streets
By Nicole Brochu
Sun Sentinel October 14, 2014

Two new designer drugs have popped up on South Florida streets this year. Both have dangerous side effects. Both have something else in common: They’re being used in e-cigarettes, once peddled as a safer alternative to tobacco smoking.

The drugs — known by the street names “Budder” and “Flakka” — show that supply-and-demand of new products is very much alive, despite a concentrated government crackdown on fake marijuana, bath salts and lab-concocted drugs of all stripes, area law enforcement officials and drug experts say.

They are examples of a creative approach to e-cigarette smoking, or “vaping,” the latest craze in recreational inebriation.

“Our real concern is that this is going to be the main method of using new, emerging synthetic drugs, whether in liquid form or solid form,” said Jim Hall, a Nova Southeastern University epidemiologist who authors an annual report on drug trends sweeping Palm Beach, Broward and Miami-Dade counties. “More and more individuals are already, and will be in the future, continuing to use vaporizers” to get high.

The e-cigarette and other vaping devices are not only in vogue, they come in all shapes and sizes, from pens to bulky contraptions “that are as big as hair dryers,” Hall said.

“You can’t buy gas anymore without someone trying to sell you an e-cigarette,” he said of the ubiquitous paraphernalia.

Now, it’s becoming hip to vape Budder and Flakka in them, Hall and others say.

Also called “butane hash oil” or “marijuana wax,” Budder is a gooey substance made in local grow houses via a highly unstable process that requires soaking the leaves and stems of marijuana plants in a chemical solvent like butane, to extract the most concentrated high-inducing ingredients, Hall said.

Crime labs in Broward, Palm Beach and Miami-Dade counties have reported seeing multiple cases of Budder come in for testing in recent months, Hall and crime lab technicians say. Because the drug is still new — and because it ultimately tests as a marijuana product — the numbers are not being tracked. Officials, though, said they are concerned.

“[Budder] is gaining in popularity and is very potent with a high THC level,” Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office spokeswoman Teri Barbera said. “It is very dangerous and explosive to produce.”

Area law enforcement officials found out just how explosive on May 6, when a 5 a.m. blast rocked a west Boca Raton grow house, blowing out windows and waking up nearby neighbors. Barbera could not comment on the case because the investigation is still active, but Hall said his law enforcement sources confirmed that the explosion has been linked to the grow house’s Budder operation.
“The Boca explosion caused a lot of attention from [local] law enforcement, and that’s when we started hearing about other cases,” Hall said, adding that because of the dangers, area police officers are now approaching grow-house raids with the same precautions they once used to storm meth labs.

They’re also a public safety concern. In May, Hall distributed a “Budder Beware” bulletin to South Florida law enforcement agencies and drug-abuse specialists, warning that the new product “poses risks to diverse groups.”

Not only should area residents be concerned about potentially explosive grow-house operations popping up in their neighborhoods, Hall said, but Budder is also dangerous to users because the waxy material is more potent and more toxic than marijuana. It can cause severe hallucinations, anxiety paranoia, psychosis and heart problems, his bulletin noted.

And, of course, in the illicit, fly-by-night world of black-market drugs, users never know exactly what they may be getting.

“They extract the THC in pretty concentrated forms, plus all the cannabinoids and chemicals in the plant, so it’s a grab bag that can vary from one product to another,” Hall said. “One of the things that popularizes its use is that when it’s vaped, it doesn’t have that telltale smell, so it’s easier to disguise.”

Flakka, on the other hand, is the latest street version of bath salts, a form of crystal meth often concocted in labs overseas and sold over the Internet.

Though not grown locally, Flakka worries law enforcement officers and drug experts because it tends to cause not just paranoia and psychosis, but extreme combativeness.

The chemical compound, identified through laboratory testing as alpha-PVP, looks and induces behavior similar to crystal meth, said Yanet Gattorno, a forensic chemist with the Broward Sheriff’s Office.

The BSO crime lab has seen more than 100 cases where submitted material tested positive for alpha-PVP since February, she said.

On the street, “they’re selling Flakka as the best thing ever,” said Fort Lauderdale Police Sgt. Nicholas Coffin.

“And it’s definitely more affordable than crystal meth,” at about $150 for an eighth of an ounce, compared with $450 for an eight-ball of crystal meth, he said.

The Palm Beach County Sheriff’s Office has seen more than 20 cases of alpha-PVP in the past year, coming in as “either powder or crystal that was loose in bags or in capsules,” said Barbera, the agency’s spokeswoman.

Flakka is the hip new incarnation in an ever-evolving trade that has drug dealers cooking up “legal” concoctions made of newly created chemical compounds that have not yet been banned. In keeping up with the ever-growing list, the Florida Legislature has outlawed 131 substances, including those that Gattorno said are showing up in alpha-PVP.

As the cat-and-mouse game continues, Hall said, “we’re going to see more and more of the synthetics disguised as other things.”

nbrochu@tribpub.com
Budder

Also known as: Butane hash oil, marijuana wax, ear wax hash

What it is: A secondary product composed largely of THC and other chemicals from the leaves and stems, or “shake,” of marijuana plants.

What it looks like: A gooey, wax-like substance, almost like a paste.

How it’s made: Often in local grow houses, by soaking the plant material in a solvent, like butane, to extract the most potent forms of THC and other chemicals.

How it’s used: Most often in e-cigarettes. Also smeared onto cigarettes or joints. Its fumes can also be inhaled directly after heating the wax on a knife over a stove.

Side effects: Severe hallucinations, anxiety, paranoia, psychosis and heart problems.
Flakka

Also known as: “Gravel” may be another street term.

What it is: The latest incarnation of bath salts, or crystal meth, tested in the lab as alpha-PVP.

What it looks like: A crystalline substance resembling rock candy.

How it’s made: In labs overseas, sold to dealers in South Florida and elsewhere over the Internet.

How it’s used: It can be snorted, injected, smoked in an e-cigarette or a joint, or poured into capsules and ingested.

Side effects: Severe hallucinations, psychosis, anxiety, paranoia, combativeness and rapid heartbeat.

SOURCE: Compiled from multiple law enforcement officials, drug experts and websites.