

Children's Hospital sees surge in kids accidentally eating marijuana

By John Ingold

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AURORA — The number of children coming into Colorado's largest pediatric emergency department after accidentally eating marijuana is on pace to more than double last year's total.

Michael DiStefano, the medical director of the Children's Hospital Colorado emergency department, said nine kids so far this year have been brought into the hospital for accidental marijuana ingestion. Of those, seven were admitted to the hospital's intensive-care unit — most commonly for what DiStefano said was either extreme sedation or agitation. One of those kids had breathing problems that required a respirator, DiStefano said.

Most of the children admitted are between 3 and 7 years old, DiStefano said.

Last year, the hospital saw eight children in its emergency room who accidentally ate marijuana. Between 2005 and 2013, only eight children were admitted at the hospital for unintentional marijuana ingestion, DiStefano said.

Although the numbers are still small compared with the total patient load, DiStefano said the patients at Children's are just one slice of what hospitals across the state are seeing.

"It is important to stop it before it becomes a huge problem," he said.

DiStefano spoke Wednesday after Gov. John Hickenlooper signed a bill attempting to do just that.

The new law, which was House Bill 1366, requires state regulators to come up with rules that make edible-marijuana products identifiable even when they are out of their packaging. Lawmakers suggested the products might all contain a unique stamp or be made in a particular shape or color.

At Wednesday's bill signing, held in the lobby of Children's Hospital, Rep. Frank McNulty criticized marijuana businesses for making edible products that resemble candy or other treats — things that he said would naturally appeal to kids.

"Marijuana edibles are dangerous in the hands of kids," said McNulty, a Highlands Ranch Republican who was one of the new law's sponsors in the legislature. "That has become all too familiar to the people who work here at Children's Hospital."

The edibles bill was one of six bills Hickenlooper signed at Wednesday's ceremony. Other bills put regulations on the amount of marijuana concentrate that stores can sell, create programs designed to reduce prescription-drug abuse and collect data on school-immunization rates.

Another bill creates a \$10 million grant program to help scientists research the medical efficacy and safety of marijuana.

Hickenlooper said the bills "are critical to our ongoing goal of making Colorado the healthiest state in the nation and our constant goal of protecting our children."