

Highly potent 'ear wax' marijuana concerns health officials

By Marie F. Estrada, Vallejo Times-Herald
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Two minutes after taking a five-second hit from a vaporizer, Josh felt the effects of the ear wax marijuana rushing over him. "I felt like I was gonna die," the 17-year-old recalled. "The movie we were watching started to look 3-D. I kept seeing lights."

What the others in the group Josh was with had failed to tell him when they offered the drug to him, was that ear wax marijuana can include up to 90 percent THC. In short, it's highly hallucinogenic. And, knowledgeable sources say, it can be very dangerous to certain people.

Officials on Solano County's Alcohol and Drug Advisory board, say they know little about ear wax marijuana -- its nickname derived from its appearance -- or its potential dangers.

The night Josh was under the drug's influence, someone telephoned Rhonda, Josh's grandmother. She picked him up and drove him to the hospital -- where his hands were handcuffed to the bed rails and he was later arrested.

(Josh and Rhonda agreed to be interviewed for this article under the condition that certain details of Josh's experience the night he tried ear wax be excluded.)

The effects of the drug didn't end with Josh's arrest. The ear wax was so intense that Josh's high lasted three days, all of which he spent in juvenile hall. A year of probation and \$7,000 in fines later, Josh is just beginning to get over the experience.

But he isn't the first -- and won't be the last -- teenager who has tried a modified form of marijuana. Even former Vallejo dispensary employees said that ear wax marijuana is a common concentrate to have in stock. Despite this, most teenagers are unaware that a high THC content in their bodies can have short- and long-lasting detrimental effects on their bodies and their lives. And what's worse, say some experts, the cannabis plant itself, whether as an ear wax variety or other type, is now bred to be increasingly potent.

Christie DeClue, a Solano County Alcohol and Drug Advisory board member, said marijuana has come a long way from the days of hippies and disco. "In the 1970s, (people) were primarily smoking the leaves of the plant," DeClue said "Now users are smoking (the more potent) buds of the plant."

DeClue is also concerned that the starting age for many marijuana smokers also has changed. Where most in the 1960s might have started while in college, today, children as young as 12 are experimenting, which can result in long-term damage.

Andy Williamson, a substance abuse administrator in Solano County, said using marijuana before age 25 can lower a person's IQ by up to 8 points since a young individual's brain is still developing.

Robert Lunch, a former volunteer for the Highway 29 Health Care dispensary in Vallejo, said many local dispensaries have ear wax in stock. It is for patients with a high tolerance and need the high potency medication, he said. Lunch said the ear wax marijuana, which gets its name from its yellow-brown appearance, ranges in potency from 50 to 90 percent THC -- depending on the source.

Regardless, juveniles don't have to wait around for a friend with a marijuana card to pick up some ear wax -- they can make it themselves.

After officials confirmed that it was ear wax that Josh smoked, Rhonda Googled the substance and found numerous "how-to" Youtube videos. What disturbed Rhonda the most was not that the ear wax exists -- but that the recipes are so easy to find -- and not one video explains the high THC content or potential risks.

Donald Poston, Josh's former counselor, said the substance is fairly easy to make, but can be incredibly dangerous. "The ear wax is made with aerosol butane and the resin of the leaves and buds of the female plants. The result is a yellow-green waxy material," Poston said. A substance abuse counselor for Youth and Family Services of Solano County in Fairfield, Poston said Josh was the first person he met who had tried the drug. Since then, it has been coming up more in group meetings with other juveniles.

The consensus? It is too strong.

On June 17, CBS Detroit reported two people have been sent to the hospital in Detroit after using ear wax. In the article, reporter Sandra McNeill wrote the two 36-year-olds -- both medical marijuana patients -- suffered episodes of psychosis.

Director Susan Smolinske, of the Children's Hospital of Michigan Regional Poison Control Center, told McNeill the two, "needed to be sedated because they were so agitated that they could not be controlled."

Josh can relate. After an intense year of fines, probation, weekly meetings and anger management, Josh said he thinks back to his decision and wishes it were different. "I think what if I hadn't stayed (with the group) and what if I had just called my (grandparents)," he said. But for the most part, he just had to stop thinking about it and move on. All he can do now is discourage his younger brother from trying drugs and start to pay his grandparents back for his fees.

"I paid when I could, but they'll get all of their money back one day," Josh said. "I'm not gonna let them lose all of that money for one deed that I did." In August, Josh will turn 18 and his advice to others is to take marijuana more seriously. "What people are telling me is that (marijuana) is not a drug, that it's just an herb," Josh said. "That's bullsh--! If it gets you high, it's a drug, so don't do it."

The reality of it all, Rhonda said, is that it this could happen to anyone. While there are groups that people might think are more at risk, many juveniles are unaware of the potency differences, she said. "(Josh) is not, 'that kind' of kid. And I'll tell you, I don't think half of them are," Rhonda said. "I think it could be any kind of kid because marijuana is so downplayed. They just get caught up."