

I-Team: Pot oil explosions a growing problem

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By George Knapp, Chief Investigative Reporter

LAS VEGAS -- Explosions caused by methamphetamine labs are all but gone from southern Nevada neighborhoods, but a new and similar threat is popping up with greater frequency in homes and apartments all over the Las Vegas valley.

Changing attitudes and laws about marijuana have given rise to homemade labs designed to create highly concentrated forms of pot, but making it is dangerous, and not only for the participants.

The end product takes several forms and is known by many names: oil, honey, and wax are a few. These concentrated forms of marijuana can contain five times as much THC, the active ingredient, as regular weed.

As more people obtain marijuana cards and public attitudes change, more of these bathtub scientists are making their own oil, with disastrous results. Across social media, kitchen magicians brag about their prowess in turning marijuana into something else, but too often, their experiments end with a bang.

A security camera in Portland watches as people across the street scramble and a home bursts into flames.

Authorities in Colorado report more than 30 oil-related explosions this year, with dozens of injuries, four times as many as all of last year.

Fires and explosions are popping up all over the West as weed warriors experiment with assorted techniques for creating hash oil, honey or the more concentrated bubbling goo known as wax.

“If you can imagine what a bomb would do in your home is exactly what we're seeing. It's complete devastation. The houses in some cases are condemned,” Metro Narcotics Unit Lieutenant Laz Chavez said.

In late May, Lt. Chavez and his team responded to an explosion and fire at an upscale apartment complex on Horizon Ridge Parkway. The sticker on the door indicates it is still sealed off. Blown-out windows only hint of what the interior is like. The resident was severely burned because of a butane explosion that demolished the apartment.

This middle-class home in Henderson is likewise boarded up and sealed shut. It will likely have to be torn down. The dumpster in front is partly filled with debris that used to be inside; that is until a would-be cook put his batch of wax into the refrigerator to cool.

The already-compressed butane found an electrical spark, and kaboom!

“The next thing you know, it was detonated. It turned the refrigerator into a bomb. The whole house was destroyed,” Lt. Chavez said.

“By the time we get there, it's a house fire,” Henderson Fire Department Deputy Chief Shawn White said.

Local fire departments, including Henderson, have responded to four hash oil fires so far but expect to see a lot more. Deputy Chief White says the methods used pretty much guarantee that problems will erupt, especially when cooks pump compressed butane into tubes packed with marijuana.

“It's not safe. If you build up that much vapor in a confined area that finds an ignition source, you're going to have an explosion,” White said.

“When you cook it, you have to do it in a very well ventilated area. I mean, these fumes are pure. I usually do it out in my backyard,” one cook explained in his YouTube video.

Earlier this year, the I-Team observed as two local chefs made a batch of pot oil to help a young girl with cancer. The oil has reportedly held her cancer at bay.

In this exercise, the cooks used alcohol as a stripping agent and were careful about having good ventilation, but as numerous online videos demonstrate, oil makers aren't exactly meticulous, and more than a few of them do their work while sampling their own product.

“That is the scary part. You have people who believe they are scientists, who believe they can experiment and at the same time, they're high. They're under the influence of the drug they are trying to extract, and that's a recipe for disaster,” Chavez said.

Those who get caught making this stuff can be charged with various crimes, Metro says, including arson or child endangerment, if children are anywhere near it, even those who have medical marijuana cards.

“I don't think there is anything medicinal about this. We're going after them,” Chavez said.

Most of the explosions seem to happen in rental properties, meaning, it is tenants not homeowners who are taking these risks.

Metro is considering whether to ask for tweaks to Nevada statutes to specifically exclude the oil or wax process from the medical marijuana exemption.