

Dangerous New Drug “Flakka” Attracting Young People

NOPE Task Force interviews a leading epidemiologist about the spread of the drug in Florida and elsewhere, and what parents can do to keep their teenagers away from experimenting with “flakka.”



“Flakka” is a new designer drug that is luring many young. Highly potent and addictive, it’s a synthetic compound that can cause heart palpitations and violent behavior, as well as lead to kidney failure or even death. Many treatment experts and clinicians aren’t sure exactly how to treat those addicted to the drug.

NOPE Task Force spoke with epidemiologist James Hall, co-director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Substance Abuse at Nova Southeastern University, about the dangers of “flakka” and what can be done to stop its spread in Florida and beyond.

1) Why is Flakka so dangerous?

James Hall: The active drug in what is being sold as “flakka” in South Florida is *alpha*-PVP which elsewhere it goes by the street name, “gravel.” It is a synthetic cathinone from a new generation of drugs once called “bath salts” before they were made illegal. Flakka is illegal as well. It is a potent stimulant whose effects are very dose specific. Thus a little bit may get someone high but a little bit more may trigger severe adverse effects including:

- Heart problems (tachycardia),
- Agitation and aggressiveness,
- Psychosis,
- Paranoia, and
- May trigger a medical emergency known as excited delirium.

Excited delirium begins with an elevation of body temperature to 105 degrees or more. The person then rips off clothing and runs outdoors convinced that he or she is being chased by people or imaginary wild beasts. The brain’s fight or flight syndrome unleashes adrenaline like strength requiring 7 officers to restrain the delusional, paranoid person. Once restrained, medical attention is required immediately to avoid death. Thirty-five “flakka” users have died in Broward County. If the “flakka” user is lucky enough to survive, kidney failure from the hyperthermia may require dialysis treatment for years.

“Flakka” users often report they are afraid of the drug yet are compelled to use it repeatedly. Its highly addictive properties are attributed to its molecular design structured to block selected neurons in the brain.

Those problems are not just for the users of “flakka” because the drug *alpha*-PVP may be sold as cocaine or methamphetamine. Various emerging synthetic drugs from factories in China or Mexico add to the uncertainty of exactly what is being sold as an illicit drug today.

Not only is Flakka a Guinea Pig drug, but it helps make users of many different street drugs Guinea Pigs too.

2) What can parents do to keep their children from experimenting with this drug?

James Hall: Keep informed and talk with their kids.

Information specifically about “flakka” is found on www.drugfreebroward.org/FacingFlakka from the United Way of Broward County’s Commission on Substance Abuse. Also visit the Palm Beach County Substance Awareness Coalition’s special website <http://dontbeaguineapig.com/>

It is also important for parents to be aware of the clear link between the early first use of alcohol and/or marijuana as adolescents and serious lifelong risks of substance dependency and mental health problems in adulthood.

Parents who talk regularly with their kids about the risks of alcohol and drugs are the major reason why young people choose not to use substances to change their brain.

3) What can be done to stop the flow of Flakka into our communities?

James Hall: Both Broward and Palm Beach Counties have developed Flakka Community Action Plans to address *alpha*-PVP and the other emerging synthetic drugs, which are now termed novel psychoactive substances (NPS) by the United Nations. See the website cited above for Broward County and visit www.pbcsc.org for Palm Beach County. Numerous community forums have help educate neighborhoods at risk. The medical community and law enforcement are developing protocols for dealing with excited delirium cases. The therapeutic community is sharing strategies related to unique problems experienced by flakka patients.

Southeastern Florida local media have helped alert the federal government and international organizations to the outbreak of *alpha*-PVP in our area, which is now spreading to others areas of Florida and the United States. International efforts are targeting the global industry emerging around novel psychoactive substances.

James Hall is a drug abuse epidemiologist affiliated with the Nova Southeastern University’s Center for Applied Research on Substance Use and Health Disparities. He is the Miami-based member of the National Institute on Drug Abuse’s Community Epidemiology Work Group. Hall compiles local drug abuse data including hospitalizations, deaths, addiction treatment, prevalence, and drug pricing, strength and abuse trends, and works closely with local drug abuse coalitions, law enforcement, and other community organizations. He served as the executive director of Up Front Drug Information and Education Center in Miami from 1982-2012 and was the recipient of the 2010 Path of Public Health Award for Epidemiology and Disease Surveillance Services from Florida International University. He is also a member of the Florida Behavioral Health Advisory Workgroup.