DRUG ANALOGS

WHAT ARE ANALOGS?

Drug analogs are also called "designer drugs." They are drugs that are made to be similar to, but still differ chemically from, compounds with proven drug effects. Analogs are made for sale on the street.

For example, the synthetic prescription narcotic "fentanyl" has effects like heroin or morphine. Slight changes in the chemical structure of fentanyl makes analog drugs which are also like heroin. They are made to be sold as if they were heroin.

Most analogs fall into three groups. Analogs of the narcotic drugs fentanyl and meperidine include "China White," "MPPP," and "new heroin." Analogs of hallucinogenic amphetamines include "MDMA," "Ecstasy," and "Eve." Phencyclidine analogs include "PCE", or "rocket fuel".

The effects of the drug analogs are similar to the effects of the drugs they copy.

WHAT MAKES ANALOG DRUGS SO DANGEROUS?

The fact that these drugs are like very risky drugs means that they carry many of the same risks as do the drugs that they copy. These vary from drug to drug. They include confusion, anxiety, depression, and respiratory failure. Because analogs are often much stronger than the drugs that they copy, risk of overdose death is greater.

Analogs often contain contaminants which can also harm the user. For example, narcotic analogs can cause symptoms like Parkinson's disease or Huntington's chorea. These are nervous system problems usually seen only among certain older adults.

No testing is done to find out the effect these drugs will have on a user. Thus the risk for problems is great.

DO ANALOG DRUGS CAUSE DEPENDENCY?

Some analogs appear to cause dependency. Users of narcotic analogs develop tolerance. Dependent users suffer withdrawal if they stop using the drugs.

It is not known whether users of other analogs develop dependence.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF ANALOG USE DURING PREGNANCY?

As with any drug, use during pregnancy creates risks to the fetus. Although little research has been done on the analogs themselves, the drugs they copy are known to cause problems. Opiates are linked with low birthweight, miscarriage, birth defects, and infant mortality. Amphetamines and PCP can also cause serious problems for the fetus.

A woman who is pregnant, considering pregnancy, or breastfeeding should not take any analog drug.

CAN DRUG SCREENINGS DETECT DRUG ANALOGS IN BLOOD OR URINE?

Routine drug screenings usually do not detect these drugs, since the analogs are slightly different from the drugs being screened for. This causes problems for drug treatment centers and parole and probation workers. A person's screening might show no drugs when in fact an analog had been used. New tests are being developed to screen for these drugs.

WHAT WILL HELP PREVENT USE OF DRUG ANALOGS?

Legal controls are part of the answer. Other steps can help. Some people use these drugs partly because they believe that an analog drug is safe, legal, or acceptable to use. Informing people that use of any such drug is unsafe or unhealthy will help them decide not to use.

LEGAL INFORMATION

Analogs were once used as a way to avoid legal penalties for drug offenses. Until 1986, laws only made very specific chemical compounds illegal. Since analog drugs were slightly different, the laws did not apply and these drugs were technically legal.

In 1986, federal drug laws were rewritten to include analogs of a controlled substance under the Controlled Substances Act. Use, possession, delivery, or manufacture of these drugs is now illegal.

Michigan law also restricts analog drugs. For more information, see the Michigan Law Fact Sheet in this series.