

Colorado deaths stoke worries about pot edibles

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A college student eats more than the recommended dose of a marijuana-laced cookie and jumps to his death from a hotel balcony. A husband with no history of violence is accused of shooting his wife in the head, possibly after eating pot-infused candy.

The two recent deaths have stoked concerns about Colorado's recreational marijuana industry and the effects of the drug, especially since cookies, candy and other pot edibles can be exponentially more potent than a joint.

"We're seeing hallucinations, they become sick to their stomachs, they throw up, they become dizzy and very anxious," said Al Bronstein, medical director of the Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug Center.

Studies are mixed about whether there is any link between marijuana and violence. Still, pot legalization opponents said the deaths are a sign of future dangers.

Twenty-six people have reported poisonings from marijuana edibles this year, when the center started tracking such exposures. Six were children who swallowed innocent-looking edibles, most of which were in plain sight.

Five of those kids were sent to emergency rooms, and two to hospitals for intensive care, Bronstein said. Children were nauseous and sleepy, and doctors worried about their respiratory systems shutting down.

Supporters of the pot law and some experts counter that alcohol causes far more problems among users, and the issues with pot can be largely addressed through better regulations.

The deaths occurred as Colorado lawmakers are scrambling to create safety regulations for the largely unmonitored marijuana snacks. On Thursday, the Legislature advanced a package of bills that would lower the amount of THC that could be permitted in a serving of food and require more extensive warning labels.

"It really is time for regulators, and the industry, to look at how do we move forward more responsibly with edible products," said Brian Vicente, who helped lead the state's legalization campaign.

An autopsy report listed marijuana intoxication as a significant contributing factor in the death of 19-year-old Levy Thamba Pongi.

Authorities said Pongi, who traveled from Wyoming to Denver with friends to try marijuana, ate six times more than the amount recommended by a seller. In the moments before his death, he spoke erratically and threw things around his hotel room.

Toxicologists later found that the cookie Pongi ate contained as much THC - marijuana's intoxicating chemical - as six high-quality joints.

Less is known about Richard Kirk, 47, who was charged in Denver with shooting his 44-year-old wife to death while she was on the phone with a 911 dispatcher. Police said his wife reported that her husband had consumed marijuana-laced candy, but no information has been released about potency.

The public defender's office has declined comment on the allegations against Kirk.

"Sadly, we're going to start to understand over time all of the damage and all of the problems associated with marijuana," said Thornton police Sgt. Jim Gerhardt, speaking in his capacity as a board member of the Colorado Drug Investigators Association. "It's going to dispel the myth that there's no downside, that there's no side effect, to this drug. It's sad that people are going to have to be convinced with the blood of Coloradans."

State lawmakers last year required edible pot to be sold in "serving sizes" of 10 milligrams of THC. Lawmakers also charged marijuana regulators with setting potency-testing guidelines to ensure consumers know how much pot they're eating. The guidelines are slated to be unveiled next month.

For now, the industry is trying to educate consumers about the strength of pot-infused foods and warning them to wait up to an hour to feel any effects before eating more. Still, complaints from visitors and first-time users have been rampant.

"One of the problems is people become very impatient," Bronstein said. "They eat a brownie or a chocolate chip cookie and they get no effect, so then they stack the doses, and all the sudden, they get an extreme effect that they weren't expecting."

Last year, the poison center run by Bronstein received 126 calls concerning adverse reactions to marijuana. So far this year - after pot sales became legal on Jan. 1 - the

center has gotten 65 calls. Bronstein attributed the spike to the higher concentrations of THC in marijuana that has become available.

Although millions of Americans have used pot without becoming violent, Bronstein said such behavior is possible depending on the type of hallucinations a user experiences. Toxicologists say genetic makeup, health issues and other factors also can make a difference.

"With these products, everybody is inexperienced," Bronstein said. "It's the first time people have been able to buy it in a store. People need to be respectful of these products."