



The Morning Line

Your Daily Dispatch  
From the NewsHour  
Politics Team

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## Synthetic Street Drug Camouflaged as Bath Salts Has Dangerous, Bizarre Effects

### SUMMARY

It's a trendy street drug which is cheap, readily available and lethal. And it has dangerous and bizarre side effects including paranoia, agitation, violence and hallucinations. Judy Woodruff talk to Virginia Commonwealth University's Louis de Felice about the uptick in abuse of bath salts as a recreational drug.

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## Transcript

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** And we turn to a story we posted online earlier today.

We have done extensive reporting on a set of drugs commonly known as bath salts. These street drugs have been on the rise in recent years and pose serious problems for law enforcement. They are packaged to look like common household products with names like Lady Bubbles or White Dove.

But the chemicals in them and the high they produce can be devastating for lives and communities. Their effects can be stronger and longer-lasting than other drugs like amphetamines and cocaine.

Researchers are trying to understand how they work and how the chemistry behind them continues to change.

Louis De Felice is one of those researchers studying this new class of substances at Virginia Commonwealth University. And he joins me now from Richmond.

Thank you for being with us.



Bath Salts: The Drug That Never Lets Go - read our investigation into the human costs, the legal battles, and the science behind these pernicious new drugs.

And let me just start by saying, when people hear the term bath salts, maybe they think of Epsom salts, which you would buy at a pharmacy, in a drugstore, but this is very different. Tell us what they are.

**LOUIS DE FELICE,** Virginia Commonwealth University: Well, you're right. It's very different than the name implies.

It's a benign street name, I think, invented to make it sound harmless. These chemicals are very different and very dangerous than their name implies.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** And how long have they been around?

**LOUIS DE FELICE:** Well, they became popular just years ago, at least in America. The drugs themselves have been around longer in Eastern Europe and in the U.K.

And the basic component of the drug, which is called cathinone, and the derivatives from cathinone, have been around hundreds and maybe even thousands of years.

It's a naturally occurring substance from which bath salts are derived.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** So, tell us, Dr. De Felice, how are they used and how are they different from other illegal drugs we're familiar with hearing about, methamphetamines, for example?

**LOUIS DE FELICE:** Well, first of all, bath salts is not a defined substance. It's a combination of drugs. There are several main components that are in bath salts. But you shouldn't think of it as just one kind of drug.

So it contains what are called cathinones, particularly synthetic cathinones.

And what we discovered was that some of these cathinones behave like methamphetamine, very similar to methamphetamine. But other of the synthetic cathinones that are in bath salts behave like cocaine.

So it's an insidious combination of two drugs, one of which, the methamphetamine-like component, releases dopamine into the brain, and the other, called MDPV, actually prevents dopamine from being taken up again.

So it's as if a person were to take methamphetamine and cocaine in just the right way to keep levels of dopamine very high in the brain for long periods of time.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** And what effect does that have on a person?

**LOUIS DE FELICE:** Well, dopamine, as you know, is a transmitter that is used for quite a few normal human functions. One of them is locomotion. It's also involved in mood and cognition.

So the effects can be locomotor.

They can be effects on a person's ability to move and function normally, but also rather outrageous hallucinations and cognitive disorders, very similar to what you would have on a methamphetamine high or a cocaine high, except the combination is particularly devastating and longer-lasting.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** And when you say devastating, what do you mean? Just give us an example of what can happen.

**LOUIS DE FELICE:** I will. The phenotype of a person who is on bath salts -- and, remember, bath salts isn't just one well-defined combination of drugs -- is very peculiar.

First of all, the person apparently feels extreme powers of strength, inability to sense pain, very hard to subdue and hold down.

The people also -- the abusers of bath salts also frequently and for some unknown reason take their clothes off and tear away at their body parts.

So these are unusual features of a drug abuser that are phenotypic for bath salts themselves and allow enforcement agents -- agencies to determine or at least identify whether or not the people are using bath salts.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** And, finally, Dr. De Felice, why is it so important to get the word out about this substance?

**LOUIS DE FELICE:** Well, I think it is important, because it's very cheap. It's readily available. It's a -- as I already said, it's a combination of drugs, some of which could be very dangerous, almost in a lethal sense very dangerous.

So I think it's important for news agencies to aware -- to make the public aware of the importance and severity of these drugs.

And I also think it's important to do research in this area, so we can find out more about these drugs. And our research is funded by NIDA at the National Institutes of Health.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** And we know that obviously these drugs have led to death in a number of instances.

**LOUIS DE FELICE:** Yes. Yes, that's the ultimate sort of self-degradation, which, of course, is suicide. And some of these abusers have actually committed suicide. That's correct.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** Louis De Felice at Virginia Commonwealth University, we thank you very much.

**LOUIS DE FELICE:** Thank you very much.

**JUDY WOODRUFF:** And, online, read the extensive story by our reporter Jenny Marder.

She digs deeper into what makes these drugs so long-lasting and uniquely dangerous, and she profiles the scientists who have tried to uncover and understand the chemistry of bath salts.



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