

The Dangers of Illegal Cannabis for Consumers and Public Health

Concerns Rise Over Safety of Unregulated Cannabis in Washington, D.C.

In Washington, D.C., the booming cannabis market has brought new opportunities and benefits to residents, but recent incidents have raised alarms about the safety and regulation of cannabis products, especially those sold in unlicensed “I-71” dispensaries. The dangers of untested, unregulated cannabis came to light when **Steph Sherer**, a D.C. resident, experienced a frightening reaction to an edible she consumed for pain management after surgery. Sherer, who is familiar with cannabis products, was convinced the issue lay in chemical contaminants, possibly remnants of extraction chemicals used in unregulated manufacturing.

Sherer’s experience and the growing presence of unregulated cannabis products in the District spotlight the risks consumers face when purchasing from unlicensed sources, leading to calls for better regulation and public awareness.

Dangers of Chemical Contaminants in Cannabis Extraction

The extraction of cannabinoids from cannabis plants often involves solvents, such as butane, which must be carefully removed to avoid toxicity in the final product. However, some unlicensed cannabis producers may skip or improperly perform this process, leaving harmful residues in the products. When accumulated in the body, butane and other chemicals can cause severe health issues, including cardiac damage and organ failure.

Lev Kerman, founder of Royal Hemp, has pointed out that butane extraction should never be used in products intended for consumption, such as edibles. The risks of chemical contamination are exacerbated by the fact that I-71 dispensaries operate without oversight from health and safety regulators, making it difficult to ensure product safety or purity.

The Role of I-71 Dispensaries and the Gray Market

In Washington, D.C., most cannabis is sold through unregulated I-71 dispensaries, named after Initiative 71, which legalized marijuana possession and gifting but not commercial sales. While medical cannabis dispensaries in the District must adhere to strict testing and sourcing standards, I-71 dispensaries operate in a legal gray area, without any obligation to test for contaminants, potency, or other health risks.

Many I-71 dispensaries are sourcing their products from unknown suppliers, often from out of state, meaning that customers have no guarantees about what they’re consuming. District Councilmember **Charles Allen** (Ward 6) has been vocal about the dangers associated with these unlicensed dispensaries. Allen recently cited cases where cannabis seized from I-71 dispensaries was found to be laced with amphetamines and fentanyl, posing significant risks to unsuspecting consumers.

Allen also highlighted the public safety concerns tied to unlicensed cannabis shops, noting that without regulation, these businesses are more vulnerable to contamination and are unable to ensure the safety of their products. The recent opening of ClearSight, the District's first official cannabis testing lab, now mandates that all medical cannabis sold in licensed dispensaries be tested for contaminants and potency.

Risks of Unregulated Cannabis Consumption

The risks associated with unregulated cannabis extend beyond the risk of chemical contamination. Cannabis plants are highly absorbent and can draw in metals, mold, pesticides, and other toxins from the soil they're grown in. Studies have shown that unregulated cannabis users may face increased risks of exposure to lead, cadmium, and even mold spores, all of which can lead to serious health issues over time.

A Columbia University study from 2018 found that cannabis users had a higher risk of fungal infections than non-users, along with higher levels of heavy metals in their blood. Long-term exposure to these contaminants can lead to seizures, neurological issues, and other chronic health problems, raising concerns about the lack of testing in unlicensed dispensaries.

The **Metropolitan Police Department (MPD)** has also reported finding amphetamines in cannabis during raids on unlicensed dispensaries. While the MPD has not released details on its testing procedures, the presence of amphetamines and other contaminants poses an added danger to consumers who are unaware of the risks.

Cannabis Sourcing and Distribution in the District

The exact sources of cannabis products sold in unregulated dispensaries remain unclear, but past legal cases offer some insight. For example, the case of **Joint Ventures LLC**, a cannabis delivery service, revealed that its founder sourced marijuana from Colorado and California, transporting it back to D.C. via commercial flights and private carriers. Similarly, recent prosecutions of the **La Dank DMV gang** unveiled a network of cannabis "stash houses" in rented apartments, further illustrating the informal and underground nature of the D.C. cannabis supply chain.

These distribution networks are often transient, with operators quickly changing locations to avoid detection. When authorities apprehended members of La Dank DMV, they seized substantial quantities of cannabis, cash, and firearms, underscoring the dangers of operating in the unregulated market. These findings point to the risks that come with a reliance on out-of-state cannabis supply, which can carry contaminants or pose legal and safety risks to the community.

Violence Associated with Unregulated Cannabis Operations

The safety risks of unregulated cannabis extend to public safety, as evidenced by violent incidents tied to illegal cannabis operations. In September 2023, a violent robbery at the **Valo Apartments** in Southwest D.C. turned fatal, with suspects attempting to rob a cannabis stash house. The incident led to a shootout, resulting in one death and serious injuries to another individual.

The robbery highlighted how unregulated cannabis operations, especially those involving large quantities of cannabis and cash, can attract crime. Local residents voiced concerns that building management ignored complaints about the drug operation within their residential complex, illustrating the potential danger unregulated cannabis operations pose to neighborhoods.

Educating Consumers About the Risks of Unregulated Cannabis

Medical cannabis industry members in the District, such as Linda Greene of **Anacostia Organics**, emphasize the need for consumer education to differentiate between licensed and unlicensed dispensaries. Many consumers are unaware of the risks associated with unregulated products or may not realize they are purchasing from an unlicensed store. Greene advocates for visible signage to indicate whether a dispensary is legally regulated.

Without such indicators, Greene warns that a health incident involving contaminated cannabis could not only jeopardize consumer health but also harm the city's cannabis industry. There are broader implications as well; an incident of this nature could lead federal lawmakers to consider taking back control of D.C.'s self-governance, jeopardizing the District's cannabis policy gains and home rule.

Moving Forward: A Call for Regulation and Consumer Safety

The stark contrast between the regulated medical cannabis market and unlicensed I-71 dispensaries in Washington, D.C., highlights a need for better oversight and enforcement to protect public health and safety. While licensed dispensaries are now required to test products for contaminants, unlicensed dispensaries operate with minimal accountability, making it challenging to ensure the safety of the products they sell.

Local advocates and officials are pushing for stronger regulation of the cannabis industry in the District. By prioritizing consumer safety and establishing clear distinctions between legal and illegal dispensaries, they hope to build a safer, more transparent cannabis market.

As the District's cannabis industry continues to grow, it is essential to create a regulatory environment that protects consumers and ensures the quality of cannabis products available to the public. Unregulated cannabis products carry risks that can no longer be ignored, and it is up to District authorities to create and enforce policies that safeguard the health and well-being of all consumers.

Email: info@cannabisriskmanager.com | Phone: +415-226-4060

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