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## Snacks Laced With Marijuana Raise Concerns

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Edibles in the medical side of LoDo Wellness Center in Denver. Marijuana-infused snacks have become a booming business. Matthew Staver for The New York Times

DENVER — All day long, customers at LoDo Wellness Center, one of Colorado's new recreational marijuana stores, reach into the refrigerator and pull out tasty ways to get high. They buy sparkling peach and mandarin

elixirs, watermelon Dew Drops, and sleek silver bags of chocolate truffles, each one packed with marijuana's potent punch.

"The stuff just flies off the shelves," said Linda Andrews, the store's owner.

As marijuana tiptoes further toward the legal mainstream, marijuana-infused snacks have become a booming business, with varieties ranging from chocolate-peppermint Mile High Bars to peanut butter candies infused with hash oil.

Retail shops see them as a nonthreatening way into the shallow end of the marijuana pool, ideal for older customers, tourists staying in smoke-free hotels or anyone who wants the effect without the smoke and coughing.

But the popularity of edible marijuana has alarmed parents' groups, schools and some doctors, who say the highly concentrated snacks are increasingly landing in the hands of teenagers looking for a sweet, discreet high, or of children too young to know the difference between pot brownies and regular ones.



Evelyn Hernandez found a cookie in her front yard. It had more than chocolate chips. KCNCTV Denver

Colorado, like the other states with medical or recreational marijuana, has tried to keep the products away from children. It has ordered stores to sell them in child-resistant packages and bars labels designed to appeal to children. It requires manufacturers to list ingredients, serving sizes and expiration dates.

But critics say the regulations are not strict enough, especially for products that can contain 10 times as much psychoactive THC as the marijuana a casual user might take. (Because prices often depend on the amount of THC, one highly potent caramel chew can sell for \$20 while a package of 10 less concentrated candies might be the same price.) And like flavored cigarettes or wine coolers, critics say, edible marijuana offers a dangerously easy on-ramp for younger users.

“They’re attractive to kids; they’re easily disguised,” said Gina Carbone of Smart Colorado, a group that opposes legalization. “They’re not being regulated properly at all to protect kids.”

One survey has found a small but growing number of children seeking treatment after accidentally consuming marijuana. Fourteen such children visited the emergency department of Children’s Hospital Colorado in the Denver area from October 2009 through December 2011, researchers reported last year in the journal JAMA Pediatrics. Before 2009, researchers reported no marijuana exposures.

The research took place after an explosion of medical-marijuana shops in Colorado, but before voters passed measures to legalize the sales and use of recreational marijuana to adults 21 and older. Dr. George Sam Wang, an author of the study and a clinical instructor in pediatrics at Children’s Hospital, said he had not seen any additional increases in children’s marijuana exposure since recreational sales began the first of this year.

The children, many of them toddlers, were taken in because they seemed strangely sleepy and disoriented. One had trouble breathing. About half had eaten marijuana cookies, cakes or candies, forms that researchers believed made them more enticing.

“Those edible products are inherently more attractive than what a bud would look like,” Dr. Wang said.

In the Northern Colorado city of Longmont, 2-year-old Evelyn Hernandez was playing in the front yard outside her family’s apartment building early in January when she spotted what looked like a chocolate-chip cookie in the grass, her mother, Aida, later told the police. The girl took a few bites before Ms. Hernandez noticed and threw away the cookie.

A half-hour later, while the family was grocery shopping, Ms. Hernandez noticed that Evelyn was drowsy and drooping, and struggling to walk. When she took her to the hospital, the girl tested positive for THC, according to a police report.

“She’s fine now,” Ms. Hernandez said in a brief interview, while Evelyn, grinning, waved and made faces from the living-room couch.

On the other side of the state, in a farm town renowned for its sweet corn, a student from Olathe High School ended up in the emergency room after a 14-year-old classmate passed some marijuana-infused brownies around the school last week. Justin Harlan, the Olathe police chief, said the brownies appeared to have been homemade, not sold from a dispensary. He said his officers were still investigating how the student had gotten the brownies and whether to file felony criminal charges.

In a letter to parents, the school's principal, Scot Brown, warned that there would be "serious consequences" for students who brought marijuana onto campus. But with recreational marijuana now legal in Colorado, school officials were bracing for more. "Marijuana food products," Mr. Brown wrote, "will be more readily available to our young people."

Twenty states and the District of Columbia now allow medical marijuana, and in 2012, Colorado and Washington State became the first to legalize the drug for recreational use. Sales in Colorado began on Jan. 1 and have gone smoothly so far, regulators say. Retail sales in Washington are expected to start this spring.

Marijuana, even if consumed by children in high doses, poses few of the grave dangers of overdosing on alcohol or drinking household chemicals. But doctors said young children who consume marijuana are at risk of falling and hurting themselves or falling asleep in a position where they could not breathe. For the most part, doctors who treated children in the study advised that the children be watched closely as their bodies digested the drug.

"There's no antidote, no medicine that reverses this," Dr. Wang said.

Compared with the 14 children who were treated after consuming marijuana, the hospital treated 48 children who had swallowed acetaminophen — the active ingredient in Tylenol — and 32 who had accidentally taken antihistamines during the same time period.

Regulators, manufacturers and retailers say they are working intensely to keep marijuana — edible or not — safe and tightly regulated. If they fail, federal authorities have warned they could step in and take action.

So far, the state has given licenses to 34 “retail marijuana product manufacturers,” who extract THC-rich oil from marijuana plants to make everything from lip balm and lotion to chocolate candies.

Tripp Keber, the managing partner of Dixie Elixirs and Edibles, said his company was fastidious about following the reams of new rules handed down by the state. It clearly labels THC content and tells consumers how long it usually takes the drug to activate. It sells its wares in silver bags and opaque silver bottles. No cartoon characters allowed.

“Having pink flamingos and grape apes on products is not appropriate,” Mr. Keber said.

The company distributes its products to about 490 medical and retail dispensaries across the state, and hopes to expand to Arizona and California. Mr. Keber wants to reach 23-year-old ski lift operators and 73-year-old grandmothers. But there is one culinary aspiration he does not have.

“We do not make a pot brownie,” he said. “It’s a little cliché for us.”