

By Gina Joseph
The Macomb Daily

Sunday, January 15, 2023

Cannabis flowers look like vegetables.

Yuck!

But cannabis edibles — like gummies, miniature cakes and rainbow rice crispy treats that cater to adults who don't like the smell of marijuana cigarettes — look yummy to any child who cannot read a THC label.

So, while they might be legal for adults they can be lethal for children, The number of cases involving kids accidentally consuming these products has more than doubled in the last five years.

“Parents have to be more responsible,” said Nick Hannawa of Troy, chief legal counsel and co-owner of [PUFF Cannabis](#) and its seven locations including Utica. “It’s like anything else that’s dangerous for kids. They have to keep it out of their reach or make sure they know it’s not for them.”

Hannawa said Puff Cannabis, a distributor with seven stores in Michigan, is taking action to educate its customers about the dangers of edibles for children starting with a sign at the front desk: Keep kids safe! Lock up marijuana.

Concerning trend

In the last five years, more than 7,000 confirmed cases of children younger than age 6 eating pot edibles have been reported by the nation’s poison control centers, climbing from 200 to more than 3,000 a year, according to a [new study by Southern Illinois School of Medicine](#) (SIU).

“And those are just the reported cases,” said Dr. Marit Tweet, a medical toxicologist with the SIU, who led the study that analyzed reports to the [National Poison Data System’s](#) 55 regional poison control centers including Michigan.

Of those reported more than half of the cases involved toddlers, ages 2 and 3, 90% of whom got the edibles at home.

“They’re the ones starting to explore and to get up and move around,” Tweet said.

Among the 7,000 cases researchers were able to track the outcomes of nearly 5,000 showing: nearly 600 kids or about 8% were admitted to critical care units, most often with depressed breathing or even coma. Nearly 15% were admitted to non-critical care units and more than a third were seen in emergency rooms.

Dr. Varun Vohra, a clinical toxicologist and managing academic director of the [Michigan Poison and Drug Information Center](#) at Wayne State School of Medicine, said their data also shows a rising number of calls related to pediatric exposure to cannabis edibles.

- In 2018 they had about 25 or 26 calls
- 2019 that doubled to 56 calls
- 2020 it rose to 106 calls
- 2021 they had 150 calls and more than 180 in 2022.

“Since we rely on voluntary reporting it’s a surrogate number but a good indicator of what’s going on,” Vohra said. “While most cases are benign, the idea that it’s increasing is a concern and we need to get ahead of it.”

“It’s serious,” Hannawa said.



What appears to be little cakes and a rainbow rice crispy treat to a child, not old enough to read, is actually cannabis edibles. GINA JOSEPH – The Macomb Daily

Gummy edibles are just another form of cannabis, which refers to all products derived from the plant *Cannabis sativa*, which, according to the [United States Department of Health and Human Services](#), contains about 540 chemical substances. The word marijuana refers to part of or products from the plant *Cannabis sativa* that contain substantial amounts of THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), which is the substance that's primarily responsible for the effects of marijuana on a person's mental state. Some cannabis plants contain very little THC. Under U.S. law, these plants are considered "industrial hemp" rather than marijuana, according to the DHHS.

Parents should also know that the potency of these products is 20 times that of a joint that their parents might have smoked in the seventies.

"The kinetics are also different," said Vohra.

When you smoke a marijuana cigarette the symptoms are immediate but edibles take longer because they have to go through the digestive system to reach the bloodstream, rather than the lungs. This process can take between 30 and 40 minutes. Parents might also consider: if one gummy has an effect on one adult (weighing at least 100 pounds) imagine what a couple of those will do to a child weighing only 40 pounds.

Hannawa and others are calling for greater vigilance by parents.

“When it’s in a candy form or cookies, people don’t think of it in the same way as household chemicals or other things that a child could get into,” he said. “But people should really be thinking of this as medication.”

“Medicine is locked away where they can’t get a hold of it, so should this,” said Hannawa, who has worked with the Macomb County Health Department to provide parents and other individuals with marijuana/medication lock bags.

Those wishing to obtain a lock bag from the MCHD can call 1-586-412-3399 as supplies may be limited.

“They give them out for free,” Hannawa said.

Industry mandates

According to the SIU study the rise in cases of kids eating pot products such as candies and cookies have coincided with more states allowing medical and recreational cannabis use. Currently 37 states permit use of marijuana for medical purposes and 21 states regulate adult recreational use.

Hannawa said the industry is growing but also evolving and adopting regulations to get ahead of the problem.

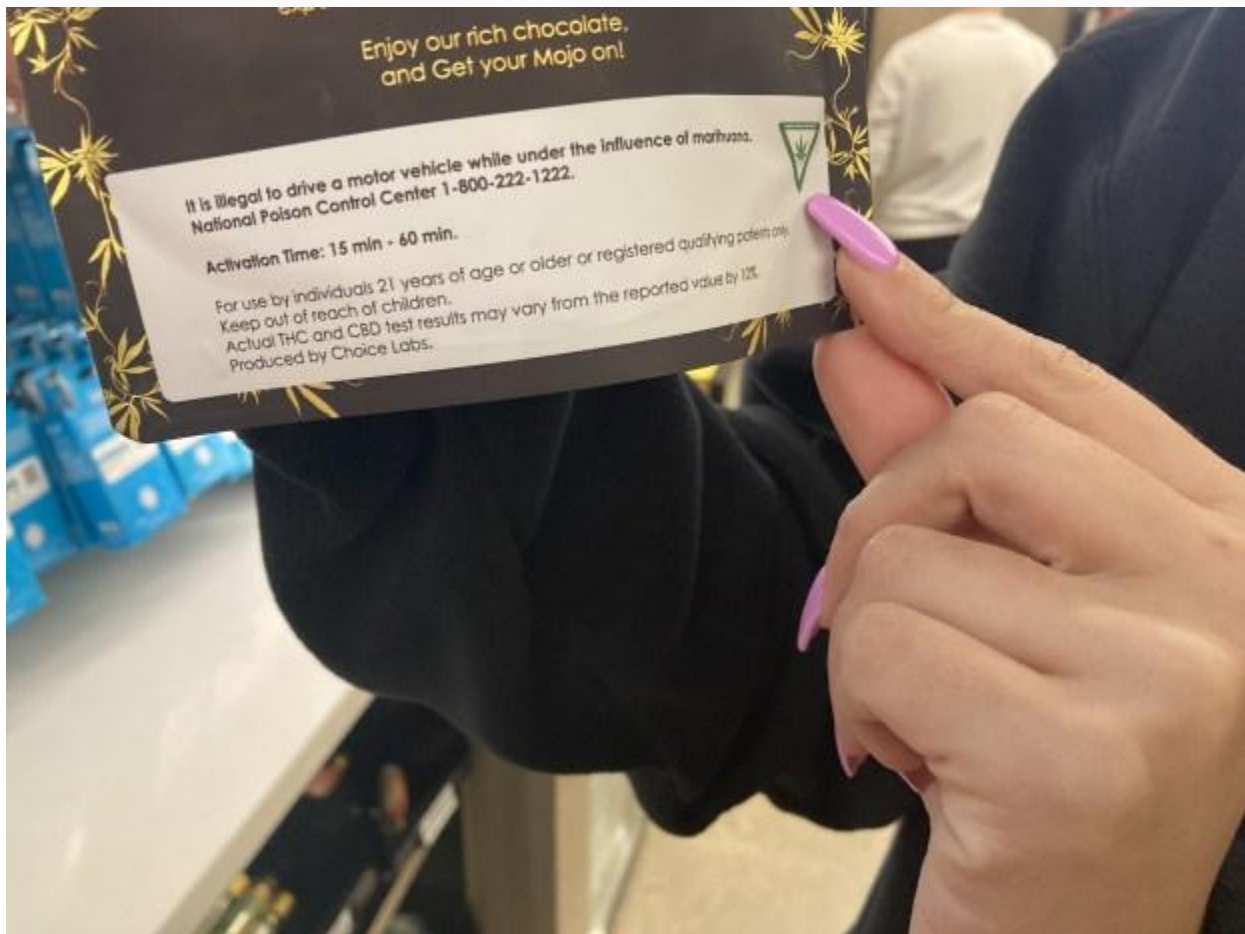
As of now every state except Connecticut, Illinois, and Nevada have general language that prohibits cannabis packaging from appealing to children. This includes prohibiting specific imagery that is attractive to children such as unicorns. At least 14 states prohibit packaging that resembles commercially available food that appeals to children such as candy, snacks, baked goods, and beverages. Colorado, Maine, New Mexico, and Vermont are the only states that do not have this prohibition.

“This is one of the new packages,” said Mariana Toma, manager of PUFF Utica pointing to a display of cannabis edibles that once featured a unicorn and now shows a portion of a horse’s head.

Older packages that came out before Michigan’s new mandate have a sticker covering the image of the unicorn.

“I feel like the industry gets it and they’re trying to be compliant and safe,” said Toma, and while the mandates come quickly the state gives manufacturers, distributors and dispensaries time to comply.

According to the [Network for Public Law](#) there are several regulations pertaining to the packaging of cannabis products in relation to how they are perceived by children but can vary from one state to another.



A look at the warning label on the package of a cannabis edible. GINA JOSEPH – The Macomb Daily

One mandate requires that cannabis product packaging be plain.

In Connecticut the package is required to be “entirely and uniformly one color, and shall not incorporate any information, print, embossing, debossing, graphic or hidden feature, other than (the required) labeling.”

Connecticut also requires packaging for edible cannabis products shall be entirely and uniformly white. Massachusetts simply requires that packaging be plain and prohibits the use of bright colors. New Jersey requires the packaging be a single color and permits logos or symbols of a different color provided that the logo is no larger than one inch in length and one inch in height.

Michigan is one of nine states (Alaska, California, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Montana, Nevada and New Jersey) that require opaque packaging for cannabis products.

In [Michigan a processor of edible marijuana products must also comply](#) with all the following:

- No edible marijuana product can be in a shape, color, package, or labeled in a manner that it would appeal to minors aged 17 years or younger.
- No edible marijuana product can be associated with or have cartoons, caricatures, toys, colors, designs, shapes, labels, or packages that would appeal to minors.
- No edible marijuana product can be easily confused with commercially sold candy. The use of the word candy or candies on the packaging or labeling is prohibited.
- An edible marijuana product must be in child resistant packages or containers.

Going beyond what is required at least four states also mandate that the poison control phone number appear on cannabis packaging (New Jersey, New Mexico, Vermont, and Washington). While Michigan does not require this information on the packaging, it must be provided on a pamphlet at the point of sale.

The Michigan Poison and Drug Information Center at Wayne State University has medical experts who can assess a situation and provide steps.

Their 24/7 hotline number is: 1800-222-1222.

Some manufacturers of vaping products are also leading the way by creating packaging that is tamper/child proof, so there is no way someone can open the package unintentionally.

“I feel like they’re taking care of the problems quickly,” Toma said.

Vohra said it’s a step in the right direction.

“It’s a positive move but there’s still a need to promote the message of more responsible users,” Vohra said.

AP contributed to this report