By TIM TALLEY
River parishes Bureau

CONVENT - A potent drug made of two legal and inexpensive substances is producing savage and often bizarre behavior in its users and may be driving them to an early grave.

The use of clickers is a growing substance abuse problem in St. James Parish and surrounding communities, according to authorities. Law enforcement officials blame an alarming upswing in violence in recent months on their use.

"We see violence in people who use this," said Steve Reed, chief deputy of the St. James Parish Sheriff's Department.

"They're irrational. They're paranoid... They're like a caged animal," Reed said.

"It causes people to lose complete control of themselves," said sheriff's detective Ray Green.

"We've been having an awful lot of fights in the streets down here and some really crazy behavior. We suspect that a lot of this violence we're having is due to clickers," Green said.

Clickers, also known as clickums, are ordinary cigarettes dipped in formaldehyde, a preservative used as an embalming fluid. The cigarette is smoked after the formaldehyde has evaporated and the cigarette is dry, officials said.

However, some users have reported that they experience a more intense high by smoking formaldehyde-laced cigarettes while they are still wet with the substance, according to authorities.

Other substances, some of them illegal, are sometimes substituted.

Marijuana can be used instead of tobacco and the cigarettes occasionally are dipped in ether, an anesthetic and solvent, or phencyclidine (PCP), an animal tranquilizer not approved for use by humans.

"It does a real number on your brain," said Meg Green, a worker at the River Parishes Alcohol and Drug Abuse Center in Lutcher.

"It probably produces a really intense, kind of scary high," she said.

"Some users have talked about hallucinating - visual and auditory hallucinations," she said.

"It runs them crazy. It goes straight to their brain," said Ray White, a human services worker at the center.

The effect it has on its users is frightening, authorities said.

Authorities in St. James reported that a 13-year-old boy who smoked a clicker tried to eat a tire off a car. A stunned adult pulled him away, but the boy ran into a tree and began gnawing at the bark.

A man high on clickers was apprehended while running naked behind the Mississippi River levee. He had defecated in his truck and was incoherent, authorities said.

"In some cases it's taken three or four deputies to hold down a person on this," Ray Green said.

Another man passed out cold after taking one puff off a clicker, authorities reported.

A 25-year-old man recently was admitted to New Orleans' Charity Hospital after overdosing on clickers, according to White.

"He was walking the streets hollering. The police had to pick him up and take him to the hospital," he said.

Five people were examined at the East St. James Hospital in Lutcher last week alone after getting high on clickers, Meg Green said.

"I think it's pretty widespread in this area," she said. "People are using it. It's accessible."

No deaths have been attributed to the use of clickers, but it's only a matter of time, authorities said.

"We'll probably have an epidemic of people dying and we won't know what they're dying from," White said.

Clickers are dangerous and their use is almost certainly harmful, authorities said. But no research has been done on the long-term physiological effect of inhaling formaldehyde-laced cigarettes.

"It's obviously toxic, and it's carcinogenic," said Joe Moerschbaecher, who has a doctorate in pharmacology and teaches at the LSU Medical Center in New Orleans.

"It's hard to tell what the long-term affect is because this is all new. No research has been done on it," he said.

"I think it's extremely dangerous. The affects are irreversible over time," said Meg Green.

Formaldehyde, a highly flammable substance, does not break down in the body and builds up after continuous use, officials said.

"The stuff never leaves your system," White said.

The chemical, a clear, colorless liquid, has a pungent odor and irritates the mucous membranes of the throat and nose.

"Down the road it's going to kill these people," Ray Green said.

The use of clickers is growing in predominantly black and low income areas of the parish, officials said.

"It's a poor man's high," Reed said.

"Most of the black-on-black crime in this area is due to clickers," White said.

Authorities began seeing clickers about two years ago in New Orleans, according to toxicologist Marie Finalet, a forensic scientist at the Louisiana State Police Crime Laboratory. Its use has slowly spread to surrounding rural communities.

"People on this get very aggressive. Their strength is unbelievable. It's an analgesic so you don't feel any pain... They're very, very dangerous individuals," she said.

"It's like they're on a bad trip," Ray Green said. "It creates a sense of power where you're not scared of anything."

One ounce bottles of formaldehyde are selling for as much as $80, and formaldehyde-laced cigarettes sell for $5 each, Reed said. A marijuana cigarette dipped in formaldehyde sells for $10.

Formaldehyde is common in funeral homes and in high school and college biology and chemistry classes. Drugstores sell 16-ounce bottles of formaldehyde for $15 retail, according to Kirt Soileau, a Gonzales pharmacist.

Drugstores commonly drop small quantities of formaldehyde into fingernail polish to help harden the nails, Soileau said. Because it's a poison, pharmacists are required to keep records of who buys it, he said.

'Clickers' cause violent crime in small towns

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Finalet said drug enforcement efforts are useless with clickers made of tobacco cigarettes and formaldehyde because their components are not illegal.

"There is no legal way to stop them from dipping anything in formaldehyde... It's easy to get," she said.

"It causes a lot of problems for the Sheriff's Office here because there's no enforcement measures," Reed said.

Clicker pushers are pulling in huge profits from eager users, authorities said.

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