Beware Spice Abuse

By Emily Sohn
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While you're busy putting finishing touches on the holiday meal, your teenagers and pre-teen kids might have other ideas about how to use the season's aromatic spices and other ingredients. And the results could be dangerous.

"The envelope is always being pushed to create something new that will get attention, potentially create a drug-like effect and can pass under the radar of law enforcers," said Christina Hantsch, a toxicologist at Loyola University Health System, in a press release.

Here are a few of the more common forms of ingredient abuse to watch out for. Tell your kids to step away from the pantry and just say no:

• Cinnamon Challenge: Thousands of videos on YouTube show people attempting to swallow a tablespoon of dry cinnamon in less than a minute, no water allowed. And although a website dedicated to the challenge offers a warning in red letters ("DO NOT ATTEMPT THE CINNAMON CHALLENGE! IT BURNS!"), the site offers video after video of young people laughing hysterically as they try it. That burning sensation, the Loyola news release explains, along with a violent coughing spell that may follow, can lead to breathing trouble and choking.

• Nutmeg Snorting: YouTube is also filled with videos of people substituting nutmeg for cinnamon in the swallowing challenge. And thrill-seekers have long been known to snort, smoke or eat large amounts of nutmeg to get a hallucinogenic high. But ingesting large amounts of nutmeg can cause nasty side-effects, according to a report by ABC News, including severe gastrointestinal distress, heart and nerve problems, scary hallucinations that can last for days, and even death.

• Whipped Cream Snorting: Like nutmeg, whipped cream can cause major problems when inhaled, according to ABC News. Through "sudden sniffing death syndrome," death can come quickly. The same thing can happen from sniffing air fresheners, hair spray, shoe polish and other common household objects.

• Chubby Bunny: The goal is to put as many marshmallows as you can fit into your mouth, then say the words "chubby bunny." Even Gwyneth Paltrow has tried it. But people have choked to death playing the game, an often-told story that even Snopes has verified.
"Seemingly silly games can have sinister effects and the holidays are the worst time for this to happen," Hantsch said. "Kids have more free time, greater access to the Internet and more opportunities to get together during vacations. Adults are wise to keep an eye on their children to make sure they are using the ingredients for their proper use."