 The increasing popularity of designer drugs is an alarming public health problem, according to a new report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

The number of new synthetic drugs rose by more than 50 percent in less than three years, the report states.

The drugs are a particular cause for concern because in many places they are legal, and are sold openly on the Internet, Reuters reports. They have not been tested for safety, and can be much more dangerous than traditional drugs, according to the UNODC. The harmless names of the drugs, such as "spice" and "bath salts," encourage young people to think they are low-risk fun. "The adverse effects and addictive potential of most of these uncontrolled substances are at best poorly understood," the agency writes in its 2013 World Drug Report.

The use of designer drugs among young people appears to be more than twice as widespread in the United States, compared with the European Union.

In a statement today, which is the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, UNODC Executive Director Yury Fedotov said, "Based on UNODC's World Drug Report 2013, there appears to be a decline in the use of traditional drugs such as heroin and cocaine in some parts of the world, but the use of prescription drugs and new psychoactive substances is growing."