



NEW PSCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES (NPS)

Designer drugs, legal highs, NPS, novel psychoactive substances, research chemicals

A factsheet from

DrugWise

NPS are drugs which were designed to replicate the effects of illegal substances like cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy whilst remaining legal – hence their previous name ‘legal highs’. NPS fall into four main categories:

Synthetic cannabinoids – these drugs mimic cannabis and are traded under such names as Clockwork Orange, Black Mamba and Exodus Damnation. They bear no relation to the cannabis plant except that the chemicals which are blended into the base plant matter act on the brain in a similar way to cannabis.

Stimulant-type drugs – these drugs mimic substances such as amphetamine, cocaine and ecstasy and include BZP, mephedrone, Benzo Fury and ethylphenidate.

‘Downer’/tranquiliser-type drugs – these drugs mimic tranquilisers, in particular from the benzodiazepine family and include Etizolam, Pyrazolam and Flubromazepam.

Hallucinogenic drugs – these drugs mimic substances like LSD and include 25i-NBOMe, Bromo-Dragonfly and the more ketamine-like methoxetamine.



The law

While many of these drugs were once legal, with the advent of the Psychoactive Substances Act it is now illegal to produce, supply, or import them for human consumption - including for personal use. Possession is not an offence, unless in prison. Some synthetic cannabinoids are controlled as Class B drugs.

Prevalence

According to Home Office statistics published in 2016, the prevalence of NPS use is generally low among adults aged 16 to 59. Fewer than 1 in 100 (0.7%) adults had used an NPS in the last year. This equates to around 244,000 adults.

Use of NPS in the last year is concentrated among young adults aged 16 to 24. Around 1 in 40 (2.6%) young adults took an NPS in the last year. This equates to around 162,000 people. Use of some of these drugs appears to be higher than average amongst the homeless population.



Health risks and harm reduction



The effects of NPS vary significantly from drug to drug and, compared to more traditional drugs, we have relatively little information on them. However, there is a growing body of evidence to demonstrate the potential short and long-term harms associated with their use. These risks include: overdose and temporary psychotic states and unpredictable behaviours; Sudden increase in body temperature, heart rate, coma and risk to internal organs (PMA); Hallucination and vomiting; Confusion leading to aggression and violence; and an intense comedown that can cause users to feel suicidal. There have been hospitalisations and deaths linked to NPS. Because of the extreme unpredictability of these drugs it is especially important to start with a very low dose.