

Synthetic cannabis●

What is synthetic cannabis?

Synthetic cannabis is a new psychoactive substance that was originally designed to mimic or produce similar effects to cannabis and has been sold online since 2004. However, some of the newer substances claiming to be synthetic cannabis do not actually mimic the effects of THC (delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol, the active ingredient in cannabis).

Reports suggest it also produces additional negative effects. These powdered chemicals are mixed with solvents and added to herbs and sold in colourful, branded packets. The chemicals usually vary from batch to batch as manufacturers try to stay ahead of the law, so different packets can produce different effects even if the name and branding on the package looks the same.

Other names

Synthetic cannabis is marketed under different brand names.

Spice was the earliest in a series of synthetic cannabis products sold in many European countries. Since then a number of similar products have been developed, such as Kronik, Northern Lights, Mojo, Lightning Gold, Blue Lotus and Godfather.

Synthetic cannabis is also marketed as aphrodisiac tea, herbal incense and potpourri.

How is it used?

It's most commonly smoked and is sometimes drunk as a tea.

Effects of synthetic cannabis

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. It's important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

Synthetic cannabis affects everyone differently, based on:

- size, weight and health
- whether the person is used to taking it
- whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- the amount taken
- the chemical that is used and its strength (varies from batch to batch).

Synthetic cannabis is relatively new, so there is limited information available about its short- and long-term effects, including how safe or unsafe it is to use. However, it has been reported to have similar effects to cannabis along with some additional negative and potentially more harmful ones including:

- fast and irregular heartbeat
- racing thoughts
- agitation, anxiety and paranoia
- psychosis
- aggressive and violent behaviour
- chest pain
- vomiting
- acute kidney injury
- seizures
- stroke
- death.^{1,2,3,4,5,6}

Long-term effects

There has been limited research into synthetic cannabis dependence. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that long term, regular use can cause tolerance and dependence.²

Withdrawal

Giving up synthetic cannabis after using it for a long time is challenging because the body has to get used to functioning without it.

It has been reported that some people who use synthetic cannabis heavily on a regular basis may experience withdrawal symptoms when they try to stop, including:

- insomnia
- paranoia
- panic attacks
- agitation and irritability
- anxiety
- mood swings
- rapid heartbeat.^{1,2,7}

The risk of tolerance and dependence on synthetic cannabis and their associated effects may be reduced by taking regular breaks from smoking the drug and avoiding using a lot of it at once.⁶

Find out more about withdrawal at adf.org.au/alcohol-drug-use/supporting-a-loved-one/withdrawal/

Health and safety

There is no safe way to use synthetic cannabis. If you do decide to use the drug, it's important to consider the following:

Regulating intake

- It is difficult to predict the strength and effects of synthetic cannabis (even if it has been taken before) as its strength varies from batch to batch.
- Trying a very small dose first (less than the size of a match head) could help gauge the strength and possible effects. Dose size should only be increased slowly – time should be given for the previous dose to wear off.
- Taking synthetic cannabis on its own without a 'mixer' such as tobacco or dried parsley should always be avoided. Similarly, inhaling the drug via bongs or pipes can increase the risk of an overdose or bad reaction.⁶

Misleading packaging

- The packaging of synthetic cannabis can be misleading. Although contents may be described as 'herbal', the actual psychoactive material is synthetic.
- Not all ingredients or their correct amounts might be listed, which can increase the risk of overdose.
- Chemicals usually vary from batch to batch, so different packets can produce different effects, even if the packaging looks the same.⁶

Mental health risks

- People with mental health conditions or a family history of these conditions should avoid using synthetic cannabis. The drug can intensify the symptoms of anxiety and paranoia.
- Taking synthetic cannabis in a familiar environment in the company of people who are known and trusted may alleviate any unpleasant emotional effects. Anxiety can be counteracted by taking deep, regular breaths while sitting down.⁶

When it absolutely shouldn't be used

Use of synthetic cannabis is likely to be more dangerous when:

- taken in combination with alcohol or other drugs, particularly stimulants such as crystal methamphetamine ('ice') or ecstasy
- driving or operating heavy machinery
- judgment or motor coordination is required
- alone (in case medical assistance is required)
- the person has a mental health problem
- the person has an existing heart problem.⁶

In an emergency

There have been a number of deaths caused by synthetic cannabis. Call triple zero (000) immediately if someone is experiencing negative effects such as:

- fast/irregular heart rate
- chest pain
- breathing difficulties
- delusional behaviour.

Ambulance officers don't have to involve the police.

Getting help

If your use of synthetic cannabis is affecting your health, family, relationships, work, school, financial or other life situations, you can find help and support.

Help and support services directory:
adf.org.au/help-support/support-services-directory/

Information about treatment:
adf.org.au/alcohol-drug-use/supporting-a-loved-one/treatment/

Synthetic cannabis statistics

An online study recently conducted in 2012 found that of the people who use the drug:

- the median age is 27 years
- 70% are male
- 78% are employed
- 7% use daily.⁸

National

- 2.8% of Australians aged 14 years and over have used synthetic cannabis at some stage in their lives.⁹
- 0.3% of Australians aged 14 years and over have used synthetic cannabis in the previous 12 months.⁹

According to Australian data from the Global Drug Survey, synthetic cannabis was the 33rd most commonly used drug – 1.1% of respondents had used this type of drug in the last 12 months.⁸

Synthetic cannabis and the law

The laws surrounding NPS are complex, constantly changing and differ between states/territories, but in general they are increasingly becoming stronger

In Queensland, New South Wales, South Australia and Victoria there is now a 'blanket ban' on possessing or selling any substance that has a psychoactive effect other than alcohol, tobacco and food.

In other states and territories in Australia specific NPS substances are banned and new ones are regularly added to the list. This means that a drug that was legal to sell or possess today, may be illegal tomorrow. The substances banned differ between these states/territories.

References

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5. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (2013). Acute kidney injury associated with synthetic cannabinoid Use – multiple states, 2012.
6. KFx Drugs Consultancy (n.d.) Drug facts: Synthetic cannabinoids
7. MacFarlane, V. & Grant, C. (2015). Synthetic cannabinoid withdrawal: A new demand on detoxification services. Drug and Alcohol Review, 34, 147-153.
8. Global Drug Survey. (2014). Last 12 month prevalence of top 20 drugs. [PDF:249KB] London: Global Drug Survey.
9. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2014). National Drug Strategy Household Survey detailed report 2016. Canberra: AIHW.

Always call an ambulance on triple zero (000) if an overdose is suspected: tell the paramedic exactly what has been taken. Paramedics are there to help and will not involve the police unless there is a danger to themselves or others.

Other help, support services and resources

Links to further help and support • adf.org.au/help-support/

For information on the difference between medicinal, recreational and synthetic cannabis adf.org.au/insights/various-cannabis-use/

● **Further information**

DrugInfo • 1300 85 85 84

Free confidential information and advice about alcohol and other drugs (9am - 5pm, Mon-Fri)

Family Drug Help • 1300 660 068 • www.familydrughelp.com.au (Victorian-based)

Services are available to support those around you who may be affected by your drug use. As well as providing understanding, they can provide information about how best to help during treatment.

Family Drug Support • 1300 368 186 • www.fds.org.au (Australia-wide)



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