

# Legal highs factsheet

This factsheet has been produced in response to requests from parents and those working with young people for information on the emerging issue of legal highs. It has been collated by the Public Health Agency (PHA) from a variety of sources.

## What is a legal high?

A legal high is a drug (a substance taken to produce an altered state of mind) that is not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act and is therefore legal to possess.

However, legal high can be a misleading term because most of the substances are regulated by the Medicines Act, which makes it illegal to sell, supply or advertise them for human consumption.

The substances are generally bought from head shops or from internet sites. Many suppliers use descriptions such as bath salts, incense or plant food. They claim these substances are “not intended for human consumption” as a way of getting around the drugs laws.

Legal highs are sold under a variety of names, often with no ingredients listed on the packet, so it is very hard to know what you are taking.

## Plant based legal highs

Some legal highs come from plants. They are cleverly marketed as being plant based natural highs – something more natural and therefore less harmful than other drugs, which may not be the case.

These could also be treated with dangerous chemicals and can have potentially serious side effects.

An example of a plant based legal high is salvia.

<i>Salvia divinorum</i>	Salvia is a plant containing psychoactive chemicals which produce hallucinations. The salvia leaf is chewed, smoked or taken as a tincture and sometimes sold as “herbal ecstasy”. Negative effects include poor coordination, dizziness and slurred speech. Throat and lung irritation, headaches and mild irritability have been reported after using salvia. There is some concern that salvia could trigger psychotic episodes, particularly in young people who may have an underlying susceptibility to mental health problems. Most harms resulting from the use of psychoactive drugs like salvia occur as a result of people injuring themselves when under the influence of the drug.	Possession is legal but selling, supplying or advertising it for human consumption is illegal.
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## Synthetic drugs

Other legal highs are known as designer or synthetic drugs. These are drugs created to get around the drug laws, usually by modifying the chemical structure of existing drugs or by creating a new drug that can produce effects similar to illicit drugs but which can be sold legally.

One group known as cathinones includes mephedrone, methyldone and methedrone. Recent media attention has focused on the legality of mephedrone and a possible link to the deaths of several young people.<sup>1</sup>

Mephedrone	Mephedrone (4-MMC, Meow, M-CAT) is a stimulant which comes in the form of a white powder or tablet and produces euphoria, alertness, talkativeness and feelings of empathy. It can cause anxiety and paranoia, heart palpitations and fits or seizures. Severe nosebleeds have been reported after snorting. Reports say regular use can result in a compulsive habit and a desire to redose when using.	Possession is legal but selling, supplying or advertising it for human consumption is illegal.
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More than 90 substances have been recorded since 1997 by the early-warning system set up to monitor and track the development and use of new drugs in Europe, and the picture is continually changing.<sup>2</sup>

More information about specific drugs can be found at [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

## What is a head shop?

A head shop is a shop that sells drug paraphernalia, eg equipment (pipes and bongs) for smoking cannabis, as well as recreational drugs that are legal to sell (though not legal to sell for human consumption). These shops may also sell magazines and clothes designed to appeal to young people who identify with this subculture.

While head shops may claim they are selling these drugs for use such as plant fertiliser or bath salts, they sell them alongside drug-taking paraphernalia, which suggests otherwise.

There has been a recent increase in the number of head shops open in Northern Ireland. The internet also remains a popular place both to buy legal highs and to learn more about the effects and how to take them.

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## Are people in Northern Ireland taking legal highs?

Professionals working in the area of alcohol and drugs in the community report that many young adults in Northern Ireland are taking legal highs, and that some young people of post-primary school age are also taking these drugs.

## Are legal highs safe?

No, just because a substance is legal doesn't make it safe. Drugs intended for human consumption must be regulated under the Medicines Act, and therefore undergo rigorous testing to determine how they can be used safely.

Most legal highs are illegal to sell, supply or advertise for human consumption because of their effects on the body. However, because producers of synthetic drugs claim these products are not intended for human consumption, they can be sold unregulated. This means that when you put the drug into your body, you are taking a real risk with your health.

## How do legal highs affect the body?

Because these drugs are so new, very little is known about them. There is some information on the short term effects which users report on websites. Some of the negative effects seem to be nose bleeds, heart palpitations, limbs turning blue, or changes in behaviour or personality. In April 2009 the Royal College of Psychiatrists called for mephedrone to be banned after reports of regular users experiencing psychosis and dependency.<sup>3</sup>

Because the production of these drugs is not regulated, what is sold under a given name one week may turn out to have a different chemical make-up the next week, so the effects on the body are unpredictable.

Another concern is that people who use legal highs are likely to be mixing them with alcohol, illicit drugs or prescription drugs, and we just don't know the effects on the body of mixing these substances.

There have been recent reports of a small number of deaths of people who have taken mephedrone, but in all cases there were other substances taken as well, so it is not possible to determine the exact cause of death. However, it is possible that mephedrone interacted with alcohol or another drug in the victim's body to cause death.



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## What is the Government doing about legal highs?

On 23 December 2009, following advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, the Government banned three substances used as legal highs – Spice, GBL and BZP – under the Misuse of Drugs Act.<sup>4</sup> The Council is researching other legal highs, including mephedrone, and during spring 2010 is expected to produce a report along with recommendations for the Home Office to consider.<sup>5</sup>

## What is being done elsewhere?

In the US, temporary scheduling allows for substances that people may misuse and which pose an “imminent hazard to public safety” to be classified as controlled substances for one year while new evidence is gathered.<sup>6</sup>

In New Zealand, legislation allows for substances to be placed on a restricted list which specifies where drugs can be sold, age of purchaser (ie over 18s only), and how the product must be packaged (ie what health warnings the packet must state). It can also specify what information must be given to the customer at point of sale (including information about possible interactions with other drugs and medications).<sup>7</sup>

## What help is available locally?

In Northern Ireland, the PHA's local Drugs and Alcohol Coordination Teams have funded a range of initiatives – from prevention and targeted education programmes to early intervention and treatment and support services.

Workers within these services are best placed to respond if you are concerned that your child has been using/misusing any mind-altering substance whether it be alcohol, an illegal drug such as cannabis or ecstasy, or a legal high. They also offer advice and support to parents so, if after reading this factsheet you still have concerns, contact your local DACT for more information on what's available locally.

## What can you do as a parent?

It is important to make sure that young people are aware that these products, whether legal or not, are not safe. This creates a vital role for parents and carers. Parents can help by making sure they have accurate knowledge themselves about these legal highs so they can discuss them with their child and make their child aware of the risks.

Here are some tips for talking to your child about drugs:

- Listen carefully – find the time and space to listen to and talk with your child. Find out what they know and if they've any worries.



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- Reassure your child that it's OK to be independent or different – sometimes children feel they have to try drugs to be part of a crowd or to fit in.
- Establish a clear family position on drugs. Explain that drugs are dangerous and because you love your children, you don't want them to take drugs.
- Give lots of praise – this helps boost your child's self-confidence and encourages them to avoid making choices that could cause them harm.
- Have positive expectations – always expect the best from your children, not the worst.
- Establish clear rules about right and wrong behaviour – children do look to parents for acceptable limits. If you have clear rules about issues such as homework and watching TV, it's easier to set rules about other behaviour such as taking drugs.
- Repeat your messages when you can – but in a way that makes sense to your child. Use everyday experiences and issues raised on television to bring the subject into your conversations.
- Although there is no “set age” for starting to talk about drugs, research shows that many children and young people are being offered drugs, so children from the age of nine upwards should know that drugs are dangerous. As they grow older, you can be more specific about different drugs.

If you have concerns about your child using alcohol and drugs, you can contact your local Drugs and Alcohol Coordination Team to find out about support and other services available in your area.

## Contacts

Northern Ireland Drugs and Alcohol Coordination Teams (DACTs)

Eastern DACT	028 9027 9398 / 028 9031 1611
Northern DACT	028 2531 1111
Southern DACT	028 3741 4557
Western DACT	028 8225 3950

National Drugs Helpline (Frank) 0800 77 66 00

## Websites

Drugscope	<a href="http://www.drugscope.org.uk">www.drugscope.org.uk</a>
Talk to Frank	<a href="http://www.talktofrank.com">www.talktofrank.com</a>



Public Health  
Agency



DHSSPS

Department of Health, Social Services  
and Public Safety  
[www.dhsspsni.gov.uk](http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk)

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