

Norfolk & Suffolk Crime Prevention

Guidance Note

Legal Highs



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Our Priority is You

What are 'legal highs'?

'Legal highs' that are actually legal contain one or more chemical substances which produce similar effects to illegal drugs (like cocaine, cannabis and ecstasy). These new substances are not yet controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and there is often not enough research about them to know about their potency, adverse effects from human consumption, or when used with other substances or alcohol.

However, more and more 'legal highs' are being researched to see what their dangers are and to see whether they should be made illegal. In fact, many substances that have been found in substances sold as 'legal highs' have already been made illegal.

'Legal highs' cannot be sold for human consumption so they are often sold as incense, salts or plant food to get round the law. The packaging may describe a list of ingredients but you cannot be sure that this is what the product will contain.

Just the fact that a substance is sold as 'legal' doesn't mean that it's safe or legal. You can't really be sure of what's in a 'legal high' that you've bought, or

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been given, or what effect it's likely to have on you or your friends. We know that many 'legal highs' are sold under brand names like 'Clockwork Orange', 'Bliss', 'Mary Jane' and have been directly linked to poisoning, emergency hospital admissions including in mental health services and, in some cases, deaths.

The main effects of almost all 'psychoactive' drugs, including 'legal highs', can be described using three main categories:

- Stimulants
- 'Downers' or sedatives
- Psychedelics or hallucinogens.

What are the effects of 'legal highs'?

The main effects of almost all 'psychoactive' drugs, including 'legal highs', can be described using three main categories:

- stimulants (like mephedrone and naphyrone which are now banned)
- 'downers' or sedatives (like synthetic cannabinoids which are now banned)
- psychedelics or hallucinogens (like NBOMe drugs which are now banned)

Whilst drugs in each of the categories will have similarities in the kinds of effects they produce, they will have widely different strengths and effects on different people.

- Stimulant 'legal highs' act like amphetamines ('speed'), cocaine, or ecstasy, in that they can make you feel energised, physically active, fast-thinking, very chatty and euphoric.
- 'Downer' or sedative 'legal highs' act similarly to cannabis, benzodiazepines (drugs like diazepam or Valium), or GHB/GBL, in that they can make you feel euphoric, relaxed or sleepy.

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- Psychedelic or hallucinogenic 'legal highs' act like LSD, magic mushrooms, ketamine and methoxetamine. They create altered perceptions and can make you hallucinate (seeing and/or hearing things that aren't there). They can induce feelings of euphoria, warmth, 'enlightenment' and being detached from the world around. Some psychedelic drugs create strong dissociative effects, which make you feel like your mind and body are separated.

What are the risks of 'legal highs'?

Just the fact that a substance is sold as 'legal' doesn't mean that it's safe or legal. You can't really be sure of what's in a 'legal high' that you've bought, or been given, or what effect it's likely to have on you or your friends.

Many of these risks are increased if the 'legal high' is combined with alcohol or with another psychoactive drug. There have been cases of death too.

The three main categories of drugs do not detail every reported risk of every single 'legal high'. In fact, for many 'legal highs', there has been little or no useful research into the short or long-term risks from human consumption. Drugs, including 'legal highs', can have very different effects on people. You can become addicted too.

Stimulant 'legal highs' which act like amphetamines ('speed', mephedrone, naphyrone), cocaine or ecstasy can make you feel overconfident and disinhibited, induce feelings of anxiety, panic, confusion, paranoia, and even cause psychosis, which can lead you to put your own safety at risk. This type of drugs can put a strain on your heart and nervous system. They may give your immune system a battering so you might get more colds, flu and sore throats. You may feel quite low for a while after you've stopped using them.

'Downer' or sedative 'legal highs' similar to cannabis, benzodiazepines (drugs like diazepam or Valium), or GHB/GBL, can reduce inhibitions and concentration, slow down your reactions and make you feel lethargic, forgetful or physically unsteady, placing you at risk of accidents. This type of drugs can

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also cause unconsciousness, coma and death, particularly when mixed with alcohol and/or with other 'downer' drugs. Some people feel very anxious soon after they stop taking 'downers', and if a severe withdrawal syndrome develops in heavy drug users, it can be particularly dangerous and may need medical treatment.

Psychedelic or hallucinogenic 'legal highs' which act like LSD, magic mushrooms, ketamine and methoxetamine can cause confusion, panics and strong hallucinatory reactions ('bad trips'), and their effects can make you behave erratically and put your own safety at serious risk – including from self-harm. Some psychedelic drugs create strong dissociative effects, which make you feel like your mind and body are separated. This could put you at risk of hurting yourself, particularly in an unsafe environment.

Are 'legal highs' illegal?

Just the fact that someone claims that a substance is "legal" doesn't mean that it's safe or legal. Possessing or supplying (includes giving to a friend) a 'legal high' that contains a banned drug is an offence.

There are many substances that were formally 'legal highs' that are now banned drugs in the UK.

'Legal highs' often contain more than one chemical, or not the same ingredients in samples of a same brand. So you cannot rely on a brand of 'legal high' that you or someone you know have used to be safe or legal because the actual contents can vary greatly. Basically, you can't really be sure of what's in a 'legal high' that you've bought, or been given, or what effect it's likely to have on you or your friends.

Did you know?

Like drink-driving, drug-driving including after using 'legal highs', is illegal because it puts your own and other people's safety at risk on the roads – with some 'legal highs' you could still be unfit to drive after the day you have used

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them. You can get a heavy fine, be disqualified from driving or even go to prison for drug-driving.

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