

NPS – New Psychoactive Substances

NPS are drugs that are synthetically designed to replicate the effects of illegal substances. People may refer to these drugs as “legal highs”, but many of the substances are now under the control of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Some NPS products can also contain illegal substances even if advertised as a “legal high”. Therefore NPS is a more accurate term because the main intention of the manufacturers is to produce psychoactive substances that allow them – and users – to evade the law.

NPS began to appear on the UK drug scene around 2008/09. Mephedrone is probably the most well-known example and is now a Class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act.



Mephedrone in crystalline form



Mephedrone in powder form

NPS are generally manufactured in China and, to a far lesser extent, India. The bulk importation of NPS is often done via mail and fast parcel services. It has been established that NPS are then distributed to users through friends, dealers and head-shops with only a minority of users buying directly from the web. The Drug Scope Street Drug Trends Survey 2013 also found evidence that other retail outlets including garages, newsagents and takeaways were selling substances to their customers. New materials appear rapidly on the market and if popular can quickly dominate the NPS market, as was the case with mephedrone.

NPS were previously available via Head Shops but various PSNI initiatives, Op Torus for example, have also completely eradicated the sale of NPS within Head Shops across Northern Ireland



Commonly encountered NPS, generally supplied via the internet



A common misconception is that these new drugs are all as different from each other as ecstasy is from heroin. However, it is highly likely that any new drug identified will fit into one of the five categories described below. Whilst some substances may have a combination of effects (e.g. MDMA/Ecstasy is a psychedelic and a stimulant; and cannabis/synthetic cannabinoids are downers

and psychedelics), there is virtually no NPS that you cannot easily fit into one of the following five groups. This is important because, once understood, it will help improve knowledge about what some of the effects and risks of a particular NPS might be:

NPS generally sold as a particular branding, i.e. Black Mamba



Stimulant-type drugs and mimic substances such as amphetamine, cocaine and ecstasy. This category includes, BZP, mephedrone, MPDV, NRG-1, Benzo Fury, MDAI and ethylphenidate

'Downers'/tranquiliser-type/sedative-type drugs (aka 'depressants') drugs: these drugs anxiety and opioid-like drugs (and alcohol). The category includes, for example, new drugs from the benzodiazepine family (such as etizolam, pyrazolam and flubromazepam, Nitrous Oxide and new synthetic opioids).

Hallucinogenic drugs: these drugs make users hallucinate, feel relaxed and happy or agitated and confused. These drugs mimic substances like LSD and include 25i-NBOMe, Bromo

Dissociative drugs: a category of drugs which mimic substances such as PCP (Phencyclidine), body have been separated, with some people feeling incapable of moving. They can also cause

Synthetic cannabinoids: these are synthetic drugs that are designed to mimic the action of the active chemical found in cannabis and are traded under such names as: Spice, Clockwork Orange, Black Mamba and Exodus Damnation.

Classification of NPS

Unfortunately there is no hard and fast rule in relation to NPS in terms of Classification under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Some NPS are Class A, some Class B and other given a temporary class banning order, meaning they are not given Class A, B or C Classification and that they temporarily fall under Misuse of Drugs Act legislation for up to a year period before being given a specific Class.

A large number of NPS contains Cathinones, Cathinones are the family of related chemicals, including cathinone and many synthetically produced chemicals, like [mephedrone](#), methylone (M1) and MDPV. Cathinones are 'cousins' of the amphetamine family of drugs, which includes amphetamine itself ([speed](#)) and MDMA ([ecstasy](#)), and which have similar effects. Cathinones were sold online and in headshops as so called 'legal highs' until they became Class B drugs in April 2010.

Another common NPS is Methoxetamine (also known as mexxy or MXE). Although there is very little evidence about its short and long term effects, we do know that it is chemically related to 'dissociative anaesthetics' like [ketamine](#) and PCP, and has similar effects. From anecdotal reports, MXE appears to be much stronger than ketamine. From 26th February 2013 MXE has become a Class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act. This means that it is now illegal to have, sell or supply MXE, including giving it away to friends.

Another commonly encountered NPS is N-Bomb, members of the NBOMe 'family' of drugs) are powerful hallucinogens, similar to LSD, which means it changes the way you see objects and reality. You might see or hear things which aren't there (known as hallucinations). The experience of taking hallucinogens is often referred to as a 'trip'. Trips can be good or bad, but until you take it you don't know how it will affect you – and once you're on a 'trip' you can't stop it. Because of their recognised harms, the Government followed expert advice and banned these drugs and controlled them as a Class A drugs, from 10th June 2014.

Classification of Synthetic Cannabinoids

A large number of synthetic cannabinoids and any mixtures that contain these synthetic cannabinoids, including Black Mamba and Annihilation, are Class B drugs and are illegal to have, give away or sell. Some products have been found to contain synthetic cannabinoids that are currently legal to possess, but as you can't be sure what's in any smoking mixture, when you purchase one you

always run the risk that you may be in possession of a Class B drug.



A commonly encountered synthetic cannabinoids branded as 'Spice'

There are a number of commonly encountered Synthetic Cannabinoids, namely 5F-AKB48 and 5F-PB22 which lie outside legislation last updated in 26 February 2013 (making some of the synthetic cannabinoids Class B). Legislation for the synthetic cannabinoids is being reviewed but currently these two compounds remain uncontrolled under the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971). There has been some press about these compounds as they are believed to be more potent- have been found together or separately in products like Doob, Magic Dragon, Clockwork Orange etc.

Useful links:

<http://www.talktofrank.com/drug/cathinones>

<http://www.talktofrank.com/drug/synthetic-cannabinoids>

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1971/38/contents>

<http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/>