

Legal highs Bulletin 1

April 2010

This bulletin supports the Public Health Agency's *Legal highs factsheet* which is available to download from www.publichealth.hscni.net

The factsheet contains general information on legal highs, while the bulletin provides updates as needed.

This bulletin, released in April 2010, focuses on **mephedrone**.

What is mephedrone?

Mephedrone is one of a group of synthetic drugs called cathinones, which have chemical structures similar to amphetamine. Mephedrone comes in the form of a white powder or less often in capsule or tablet form. It is normally snorted or swallowed and acts as a stimulant to produce euphoria, alertness, talkativeness and feelings of empathy.

Is mephedrone still legal?

No. On 16 April 2010, cathinones, including mephedrone, were classified as a Class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act making them illegal to possess or supply.¹ The penalty for possession is up to five years in prison or an unlimited fine (or both), while the penalty for dealing is up to 14 years in prison or an unlimited fine (or both).

Will mephedrone no longer be available?

Mephedrone and other cathinones have become very popular and are likely to remain in circulation. This means it is important that information on the health risks of mephedrone is still available.

What are the health risks of mephedrone?

Mephedrone users face similar risks to those associated with both amphetamine and ecstasy type drugs. These include overstimulation of the cardiovascular system, with risk of heart and circulatory problems; and overstimulation of the nervous system, with risk of fits and of agitated and paranoid states and hallucinations.²

Users have also reported palpitations, seizures, vomiting, sweats, chills, cold extremities (blue fingers), pain and swelling in nose, nosebleeds and psychosis.



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As with any other drug, the risks associated with using mephedrone increase if it is used with other substances. Using mephedrone in combination with other stimulants, prescription drugs, large amounts of alcohol or other depressants is particularly risky. Taking it in large amounts as a “binge” can also increase the risk.

Using mephedrone may be particularly hazardous for people with a history of mental health problems, cardiac problems or neurological disorders, or those currently taking medication for these conditions.

Is mephedrone addictive?

Because mephedrone is similar in chemical structure to amphetamine, and amphetamine carries a risk of addiction, it is likely that mephedrone can also be addictive. Reports from users suggest it can be compulsive to use, resulting in them using more and more in one session, which increases the risk to health. Some users have also reported developing cravings after use.

Now mephedrone has been banned, is this the end of legal highs?

No. News reports suggest that work has been ongoing for some time to develop alternative legal highs to get around the law, and websites which previously sold mephedrone are now offering other legal highs for sale.

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs states that we need to consider a range of options for

limiting the rapid spread of such substances and that they intend to provide the Government with further advice on the possible control of legal highs.³

Where can I get more information or help?

The Public Health Agency's *Legal highs factsheet* provides guidance on talking to your child about drugs, and gives contact details for organisations that can provide support to users, parents and families. This can be downloaded from www.publichealth.hscni.net

References

1. Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. Press release: Mephedrone ban in UK. 15 April 2010.
2. Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride. Mephedrone update. Belfast: Department of Health, Social Service and Public Safety (DHSSPS); 1 April 2010.
3. Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD). Consideration of the cathinones. London; 2010.

