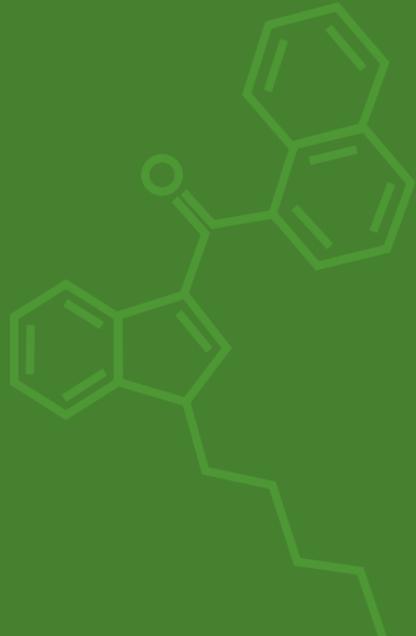


14

**14 ways to
reduce your risk from
synthetic cannabinoids**

herbal

harm reduction advice



What is herbal?

Herbal is a popular name for **synthetic cannabinoids***.

It's a dried plant base that has been dipped or sprayed with one or more chemicals.

84 different synthetic cannabinoids have been identified across Europe, and some are much stronger than others.

Herbal is often much stronger than cannabis.

*Synthetic cannabinoids are chemicals that are made to act like the active part of cannabis

The only way to avoid all the risks is to not use herbal.

If you *are* going to take it, and want to know how to reduce your risks then you may find this leaflet useful.

What are the main risks of using herbal?



Herbal is anything but “herbal”. It contains **unknown chemicals**, some much stronger than others, and can have **deadly side effects**.

The effects vary a lot depending on:

- your body’s individual reaction;
- your state of mind;
- the type you’re using;
- how much you use;
- what other drugs (or alcohol) you’re using



The positive effects may be euphoria, hallucinations, laughing a lot, and feeling calm and relaxed.



But the effects may be quite different to this. Some users report breathing difficulties - sometimes people stop breathing altogether - and extreme agitation.

6

It can affect different people very differently, and I've seen seasoned drug users go into a fit after just two puffs.



One of the main risks is to your mental health.

Some users report:

- **anxiety**, panic attacks and **feeling really low**;
- **hallucinations** / loss of reality - the user tries to harm themselves or others as a result;
- **a bad comedown** where they feel depressed and lethargic for days after;
- severe **psychiatric symptoms** after use - the user has had to go to hospital for treatment;
- **paranoia** that lasts even after the other effects have worn off;
- **fits / seizures** are also a recognized effect of using herbal.

There is also some evidence of serious damage to kidneys.



There have been a number of reports of people across Northern Ireland experiencing unpleasant & dangerous side effects, and needing to go to hospital, after smoking herbal. Across Europe **a number of people have died** after using herbal, and many more people have been **hospitalized**.

The bad effects can happen to anyone, but it may be more likely if you use a high dose, keep using for days without a break, or mix herbal with alcohol or other drugs.



**Is there anything I can do
to reduce the risk?**

ways to reduce your risk



Think carefully about the risks before you start, especially if you have anxiety or mental health problems.

Herbal can have a serious impact on mental health, with some users experiencing distressing or dangerous mental states.

You can protect your mental health by not using herbal.



#2

As herbal can make you anxious and paranoid, only use in a place where you feel safe.



#3

Try to use with someone else there, someone you can trust to look after you if things go wrong.



#4

Try and have a decent meal before you use. You'll feel better for it.



Think about the people you use with, and the views they have on how to take drugs.

Groups of friends who take drugs together tend to have "**norms**" or ways they normally do things. If those norms include using bongos, then the people in that group are at a higher risk. Having norms you think are sensible can reduce your risks a lot. **Chat with your mates about it.**



#6

Try to find out as much as you can about the particular type of herbal you plan to take.

Ask other people who have taken it what effects it had on them - but remember that the same drug can act differently on different people. **The info you have may be false:** drugs with the same name may not actually be the same. Also, the description on the package, or what you've read about it may be inaccurate.



#7

Carry condoms (you know why!)



Once you're having a smoke, there are more things you can do to reduce your risk.



#8

Starting doses need to be much smaller than if you were using cannabis.

The strength may be much stronger than you expect: start with a very small dose (match-head size or less) and only take more carefully, giving time for previous doses to wear off;



#9

Be VERY careful about using herbal in pipes or bong: it is much easier to take too much.



What to do if a friend has a panic attack...

...get the person to sit down, head down, encourage regular breathing and reassurance. However if there are more serious symptoms, including delusional behaviour or breathing difficulties, **call an ambulance.**



If someone appears to be hallucinating or has lost touch with reality...

...remain calm, and try to help the person:

- approach the person quietly while calling their name;
- ask the person to tell you what is happening. Ask whether he or she is afraid or confused;
- tell the person that he or she may be having a hallucination and....



If someone appears to be hallucinating or lost touch...

...that you don't see or hear what he or she does. Try not to argue with them;

- talk with the person about the experience, and ask whether there is anything you can do to help;
- help the person find ways to handle the hallucinations, such as listening to soothing music; and
- do not hurry the person.



#12

**If you, or anyone with you,
experiences worrying effects,
call an ambulance immediately.**



#13

Using herbal regularly can increase your tolerance and lead to dependence and withdrawal symptoms.

If you're using herbal, don't use it all the time, and try to take breaks from using.



#14

Don't use herbal at the same time as other drugs or alcohol



**Where can I get more
information or help?**

- **If you think you may have a problem with drugs...** your GP can provide help and advice and refer you to other relevant services.
- **If you/someone has immediate serious health concerns relating to drug use...** emergency services should be contacted immediately.
- **If you/someone is in distress or despair...** you can ring Lifeline at 0808 808 8000 to talk to a counsellor in confidence.
- **If you've taken a drug with nasty side effects & think others should be warned about it...** please contact the PHA's Drug & Alcohol Monitoring & Information System: damis@hscni.net
- **If you'd like to reduce the harms from your drug use...** you can go to a "Low Threshold Service". Staff will not judge you for taking drugs, and will help you find ways to reduce your risks of harm >>>

Contact your local Low Threshold Services at:

Belfast area. Drug Outreach Team: 02895 047 301

Northern area. Extern: 02825 689 601

Southern area. Extern: 02825 689 601

S. Eastern area. Simon Comm: 07435 754307 / 754302

Western area

- Derry area: Depaul. 02871 365 259
- Fermanagh & Omagh areas: Arc Healthy Living Centre. 02868 628741
- Limavady area: First Housing. 02871 371 849

Telephone numbers can change. If you're having problems getting through on any of the telephone numbers, check the details on the PHA's site:

www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/drug-and-alcohol-directories-services

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