

# Synthetic Cannabis

## Patient Education Module

### What is synthetic cannabis?

Synthetic cannabis is a new psychoactive substance that is designed to mimic or produce similar effects to cannabis. Synthetic cannabis is produced with man-made chemicals that create similar effects to delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the active ingredient in cannabis. However, reports suggest it also produces additional *negative* effects. These powdered chemicals are mixed with solvents and added to herbs and sold in colorful, branded packets. The chemicals usually vary from batch to batch as manufacturers try to stay ahead of the law, so different packets can produce different effects even if the name and branding on the package looks the same.

### Other names

Synthetic cannabis is marketed under different brand names. Spice was the earliest in a series of synthetic cannabis products sold in many European countries. Since then a number of similar products have been developed, such as Kronic, Northern Lights, Mojo, Lightning Gold, Lightning Red and Godfather. Synthetic cannabis is also marketed as aphrodisiac tea, herbal incense and potpourri.

### Effects of synthetic cannabis

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. Synthetic cannabis is relatively new, so there is limited information available about its short-term and long-term effects, including how safe or unsafe it is to use. However, it has been reported to have similar effects to cannabis along with some *additional negative and potentially more harmful* ones including:

Fast and irregular heartbeat  
Racing thoughts  
Agitation  
Anxiety and paranoia  
Stroke  
Death

Aggressive and violent behavior  
Chest pain  
Vomiting  
Acute kidney injury  
Seizures  
Psychosis

### Long-term effects

There has been limited research into synthetic cannabis dependence. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that long-term, regular use can cause tolerance and dependence.

## **Withdrawal**

Giving up synthetic cannabis after using it for a long time is challenging because the body has to get used to functioning without it.

It has been reported that some people who use synthetic cannabis heavily on a regular basis may experience withdrawal symptoms when they try to stop, including:

Insomnia

Paranoia

Panic attacks

Rapid Heartbeat

The risk of tolerance and dependence on synthetic cannabis and their associated effects may be reduced by taking regular breaks from smoking the drug and avoiding using a lot of it at once.

## **Health and safety**

There is no safe way to use synthetic cannabis. It is difficult to predict the strength and effects of synthetic cannabis (even if it has been taken before) as its strength varies from batch to batch. Inhaling the drug via bong or pipes can increase the risk of an overdose or bad reaction. Use of synthetic cannabis is likely to be more dangerous when:

Taken in combination with alcohol or other drugs, particularly stimulants such as crystal methamphetamine ('ice') or ecstasy

Driving or operating heavy machinery

Judgment or motor coordination is required

The person has a mental health problem

The person has an existing heart problem

## **Misleading packaging**

The packaging of synthetic cannabis can be misleading. Although contents may be described as 'herbal', the actual psychoactive material is synthetic. Not all ingredients or their correct amounts might be listed, which can increase the risk of overdose. Chemicals usually vary from batch to batch, so different packets can produce different effects, even if the packaging looks the same.

## **Mental health risks**

People with mental health conditions or a family history of these conditions should avoid using synthetic cannabis. The drug can intensify the symptoms of anxiety and paranoia.