

Myth 10 Fact Sheet: “New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) are newly designed drugs”

What are these substances, why are they increasing and what are the risks to the body? With the rapid increase in the spread and levels of NPS worldwide, it is important to get the facts straight...

What are New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)?

According to the United Nations, “new psychoactive substances” are defined as “substances of abuse, either in a pure form or a preparation, that are not controlled by the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs or the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, but which may pose a public health threat”.¹

Most NPS are synthetic substances produced to mimic the effects of existing, ‘traditional’ drugs such as cocaine, cannabis, LSD and heroin². This includes a variety of substances, such as *herbal highs*, *legal highs*, *bath salts*, *research chemicals* and *laboratory reagents*. They are sold in different forms including powders, pills, and liquids, soaked onto blotting paper and sprayed onto herbal material³.

For a more detailed list on what categories of NPS have already been identified go to:

- https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/FACTSHEET_NPS.pdf

Why are they “new” and where do they come from?

Although many NPS have been around before the existence of the Conventions, the number of NPS is ever expanding, as a small adjustment to the molecular structure is sufficient to be considered a new drug and must therefore be researched before being placed under control of the Conventions.

Between 2009 and 2016, a total of 739 NPS were reported by 106 countries and territories to the UNODC Early Warning Advisory.⁴ The regions reporting the highest number of substances are Asia, Europe and North America.⁵ A big contributor to this trend has been the internet, which has made drug purchase easier, anonymous and at lower risk.⁶



Source: UNODC



Source: UNODC



Source: Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA)

¹https://www.unodc.org/documents/drugs/printmaterials2013/NPS_leaflet/WDC13_NPS_leaflet_EN_LORES.pdf.

² <http://neptune-clinical-guidance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/NEPTUNE-Guidance-March-2015.pdf>

³ <http://neptune-clinical-guidance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/NEPTUNE-Guidance-March-2015.pdf>

⁴ https://www.unodc.org/wdr2017/field/Booklet_4_ATSNPS.pdf

⁵http://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_59/ECN72016_CRP2_V1601405.pdf

⁶http://www.unodc.org/documents/commissions/CND/CND_Sessions/CND_59/ECN72016_CRP2_V1601405.pdf

Are they illegal?

While, the Conventions may not control all of the NPS in existence, this does not prevent a country from controlling the drug. Whether there is legal legislation on a certain NPS may vary according to the country, however the health risk is always a given. These synthetic substances are aiming to mimic the effects of drugs and therefore involve chemicals that should not be underestimated.

Who is most at risk?

NPS tend to be used by young people (aged 16 – 24) and young men in particular, who are experimenting with drugs rather than purposefully aiming for a specific effect⁷. Particularly, because they are experimenting and unfamiliar with how their body may react to drugs, the risk factors are heightened. Yet, regardless of age and gender, anyone taking NPS is putting themselves at a considerable risk.

What are the risks?

Content. NPS can be grouped into six pharmacological effect groups: (a) opioids (b) stimulants (c) sedatives/hypnotics (d) classic hallucinogens (e) dissociatives (f) synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists.⁸ This range makes it very difficult to speak about one single risk category and we do not know the implications of how some of these substances affect the body⁹.

Health problems. The use of NPS is often connected to health problems. Side effects are varied but may include anything from seizures, aggression, acute psychosis to death.¹⁰ NPS users have frequently been hospitalised with severe intoxication or even died, particularly when mixing NPS with other substances such as alcohol or other illicit drugs.¹¹

Long term effects. Little is known about the nature and magnitude of NPS long-term effects, due to the range and ever-evolving types of NPS. Even if the molecular structure of a known NPS is adjusted ever so slightly, the health consequences become entirely unpredictable, ranging from indifferent to detrimental. More research is needed to grasp the magnitude of the problem, yet the consensus is clear: the potential for harm is very large and poses a considerable threat to our health system.

Treatment. No knowing the exact chemical substances and composition in an NPS means acute treatment in emergencies is more complex and risky.

**Particularly because we know so little of the possible effects of NPS,
it is important not to test these out on your body.**

**Show us how much this topic means to you and share your thoughts by taking part
in our **Fact Sheet Challenge!** ----->**

FYI: Look at our *Myth 7: Using drugs helps you to feel good and relaxed* and *Myth 6: It Impacts only me?* fact sheets for more information on this topic.

⁷ <http://neptune-clinical-guidance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/NEPTUNE-Guidance-March-2015.pdf>

⁸ https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/NPS_leaflet_2016_EN_LORES.pdf

⁹ https://www.unodc.org/wdr2017/field/Booklet_4_ATSNPS.pdf

¹⁰ https://www.unodc.org/documents/scientific/NPS_leaflet_2016_EN_LORES.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.drugsaction.co.uk/drugs/a-z-drugs/new-psychoactive-substances>