

# Facts about Synthetic cannabinoids

Originally synthetic drugs were produced commercially for valid medical purposes and over time people began producing them (acid, methamphetamine, ecstasy etc.) in clandestine labs.

Based on their chemical composition synthetic drugs are commonly divided into two categories:

- **synthetic cannabinoids** which act on the cannabinoid receptors in the body and brain and mimic the effects of THC (the primary psychoactive compound in cannabis)
- **synthetic stimulants** that mimic the effects of cocaine, LSD and methamphetamine.

**This information sheet is about synthetic cannabinoids commonly known as ‘synnies’**

Most synthetics in NZ are imported as a powder which is dissolved in a solvent then sprayed onto finely chopped plant matter (often damiana). Most are smoked in the same way as cannabis. Liquid synthetics are smoked through e-cigarettes/ vaporisers.

## Harms associated with synthetics

- They act on the cannabinoid receptors in our brain with much greater force than does THC in cannabis. This makes them more potent and more capable of producing strong effects on our mental and physical state
- Synthetics aren't tested in the way medicinal drugs are. There is no quality control in the process so there is no way of knowing which of the many synthetic cannabinoids may be present in plant material or in liquids
- A packet of plant matter can contain chemical “hot spots” - dangerously potent areas of the synthetic cannabinoid/s due to a poorly mixed solution or uneven spray job
- Batches of the same product can give different effects. And the same packaging does not mean the same or expected cannabinoid is present
- Each chemical has different effects at different dosages. It is impossible to know what or how much of each compound is present in the product
- There is a risk of poisoning and other toxic effects when potent chemicals are used. Local sellers admit adding kitchen spray cleaner, rat poison, and horse tranquiliser to the plant material
- People react to drugs in different ways. Some people will be more severely affected than others – and there is no way of knowing who those people will be
- All drugs can be affected by other drugs, alcohol, the person's mental health and underlying medical conditions. These products are more likely to cause problems for people who currently or have previously had issues with their mental health and/or with alcohol and other drugs
- Perhaps the most glaring difference between synnies and cannabis is that no deaths have ever been recorded due to cannabis toxicity but there is evidence that drug toxicity has caused many synthetic-cannabinoid related deaths.

## Reducing the harms

- No use is the safest option. Do not use if pregnant or breastfeeding, or you have a health condition, or are on meds
- Use in small amounts because different parts of the same bag may be of different strengths
- Avoid using when alone; make sure someone sober is around in case they are needed
- We strongly recommend avoiding alcohol when using synnies
- Do not attempt to drive or operate heavy machinery.

## What the drug does

In our body we have cannabinoid receptors as part of our endocannabinoid system which is involved in various physiological processes including appetite, pain-sensation, mood, and memory. When we smoke or ingest cannabis the cannabinoids (chemical compounds) found in marijuana interact with the cells in our endocannabinoid system.

Many people expect synthetics to have the same effect as natural cannabis however there are around 200 different synthetic cannabinoids each with its own chemical structures which may be similar or different to THC. Each compound can cause different responses; some are more potent and some less potent than cannabis. Synthetic cannabinoids like AMB-Fubinaca is much more likely to cause harm as it is reported to be 75-100 times more powerful than natural THC.

**It is difficult to describe the general effects as different chemicals have different effects**

Some have effects similar to cannabis so people may feel relaxed, energetic and talkative, and hungry

Effects usually last around 2-4 hours but this can vary from person to person. Substances with this type of short lifespan are easier to become addicted to because you need to use more and more often to get the desired effect

### Physical effects

Short term physical effects can include seizures, severe agitation, dizziness, nausea and vomiting, tremors, high blood pressure, rapid heart rate and breathing, abdominal or chest pain

Long term physical effects include constant vomiting (hyperemesis which can occur after two weeks); persistent cough with mucus; difficulty breathing

During withdrawal people may experience upset stomach, body aches, strong cravings

### Mental effects

Short term mental effects include memory loss, psychosis, paranoia, hallucinations, thoughts racing

Long term mental effects include depression and recurring psychotic episodes

During withdrawal people experience low mood/ irritability, panic attacks, inability to sleep, and severe confusion/ disorientation

***Withdrawal from synthetics is more severe than withdrawal from cannabis.  
People experiencing severe withdrawal symptoms are advised to contact CADS or your GP for help***

### Seek medical help if you see or experience any of these symptoms

Loss of consciousness, can't be woken up

Rigid muscles, spasms, seizures

Shaking and shivering or fever and overheating

Foaming at the mouth

Paranoia, panic, fear

Confusion or distress

Agitation and aggression

Someone who's overdosing usually isn't aware of what's happening so they need help. If their face turns blue they are close to death and need immediate attention – start CPR – and call 111 immediately.

If they are breathing put them in the recovery position, lying on their side. Stay with them until help arrives

If you are asked if it's an overdose be as honest as you can. If you're scared say you think the person took something

If they are over-heating loosen outer clothing or put a wet towel on their neck or under their arms

Don't wait for them to get over it and don't induce vomiting as this can cause choking.

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