

14. Khat and Mephedrone

(2021 version)

Contents	Page No.
Introduction	2
How It Is Taken	2
Health	2
The Law	4
Mephedrone	4

Introduction

Khat (also spelled qat) is a green leafed shrub also known as the Tree of Paradise (*Catha edulis*) found in the Yemen and throughout eastern Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. References to khat use can be found in Arab journals from the 13th century and medical use of khat dates back to Alexander the Great, who treated

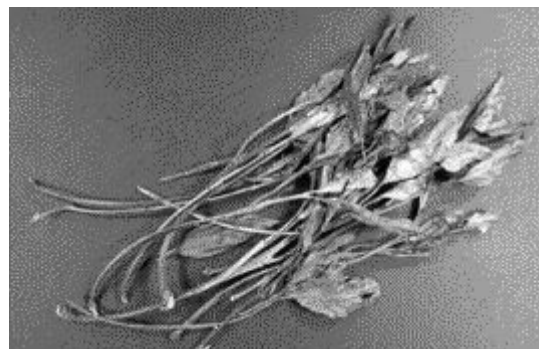
his soldiers for an unknown 'epidemic disease'. Physicians prescribed it to treat depression and lack of energy.

Khat has been used in Somalia and Yemen for centuries and has recently turned up in Europe, including the UK, particularly amongst immigrants and refugees from countries such as Somalia, Ethiopia and Yemen.

How It Is Taken

The fresh buds and leaves of the plant are chewed to a mush and held in the cheek, but khat can also be made into a tea or chewable paste. The active ingredients start to deteriorate two days after the plant has been harvested, meaning it must be consumed when it is fresh. The 'mush' is chewed periodically to release more of the active ingredients.

The trade in khat is said to be worth £50m and London is the nerve centre. A bunch of fresh leaves (look like stalks of roses) costs £3-4 and 2 bundles are needed for the effect. The main group currently associated with khat in the UK is the Somali community who buy it from greengrocers in the East End of London. If a method could be found for extracting the main active ingredient directly from the plant - similar to the simple refining process that yields cocaine from the coca plant - then khat could have the potential for reaching a wider market.



In the US a synthetic version called CAT, a sort of extremely high-powered speed, is already available and proving popular.

In some countries where alcohol is banned, khat is commonly used in social situations and is considered a rival to coffee. It's cheap, legal and thousands of people get high on it every day, but users risk ruining their lives and it is placing the UK at the centre of a drug smuggling network.

Health

Khat is a stimulant and contains two pharmacologically active ingredients, cathinone and cathine. Cathinone is an alkaloid, like nicotine, cannabis, caffeine and morphine, and is a naturally occurring amphetamine-like drug. Cathine, the less potent ingredient, is also an alkaloid and contributes, to a lesser extent, to the stimulant effects. Street names include Quat, Qat, Qaadka, chat, Catha edulis.

As the 'mush' is held in the cheek, the cathinone and cathine are absorbed by the blood capillaries there, meaning the effects occur quite quickly. The risks and

effects with khat are similar to those for amphetamine. Some people like the short-term positive effects, such as:

- alertness and talkativeness
- suppressed appetite
- feelings of calm

However, these are accompanied by short-term negative effects such as:

- anxiety
- irritability, anger and possibly violent behaviour
- insomnia and physical exhaustion
- inflammation of the mouth, oral cavity and digestive tract
- as with synthetic amphetamines it dehydrates users. It creates a powerful thirst and therefore several litres of water are drunk but no food eaten

Prolonged and excessive use can lead to long-term effects on the body and the brain such as:

- anorexia
- risk of oral cancer
- cerebral haemorrhaging
- cirrhosis of liver
- gastric conditions
- migraines
- heart disease
- loss of sex drive in men
- depression
- psychosis
- paranoia
- schizophrenia

Users of khat may behave in a way that seems as if they are irritable and tired all the time, and they may also be quite talkative and hyperactive. They may not eat very much.

It is becoming apparent (especially in London) that khat use is often overlooked by mental health workers. There is also a risk of chemical poisoning because of the variety of fertilisers used in growing the plant.

Khat creates psychological dependence so that users feel depressed and low unless they keep taking it.

The Law

Khat including the substances Cathinone and Cathine are Class C drugs. Cathinone may not be lawfully possessed or supplied except under a licence for research or 'other special purposes', although Cathine may be prescribed.

Other cathinones - Mephedrone

Mephedrone is derived from cathinone (the same chemical found in khat). Two other drugs derived from cathinone are methadrone and methylone. The effects of methadrone are said to be similar to mephedrone, while methylone is said to give the user an experience more like that of ecstasy.

Mephedrone (4-methylmethcathinone) is a stimulant which is closely chemically related to amphetamines. Users report that mephedrone produces a similar experience to drugs like amphetamines, ecstasy or cocaine.

Other less common compounds from the cathinone family that may be used recreationally include flephedrone (4-FMC), bromomethcathinone (4-BMC), ethylone (MDEC), and buphedrone and it is possible that other compounds are in circulation.

The British Crime Survey 2014/15 shows that 5.3% of 16-24 year-olds had used the drug in the last year, which was slightly less than the previous year.

These drugs have become popular among club-goers and among more general recreational drug users. They can be bought on the internet and there are a significant number of websites selling mephedrone, methadrone and methylone. Usually, websites advertise the products as 'plant feeder' or 'not for human consumption'.

Some street names for mephedrone are: Meph, m-cat, MCAT, Miaow miaow, 4-mmc, bubbles, white magic, plant feeder.

How It Is Taken

Mephedrone is a white, off-white or yellowish powder, which is usually snorted, but can also be swallowed in bombs (wraps of paper) and may also appear in pill or capsule form. It can also be injected, but this is rare.

Health

There is no significant clinical literature on the effects of mephedrone and the other cathinone derivatives currently gaining popularity on the drug scene.

Many people who have used mephedrone and similar drugs report a sense of euphoria and wellbeing, with users becoming more alert, excited, confident, talkative and experience an increased sex drive. People who have used methylone, which is closely chemically related to ecstasy, particularly report a feeling of empathy with those around them.

People who snort these substances can experience extremely sore nasal passages, throats and mouths, with burns or cuts caused by the chemicals sometimes leading to nose bleeds. Some people swallow the drugs instead to avoid these particular problems.

Like other stimulant drugs, cathinone derivatives can have an impact on the heart. Some users report heart palpitations, or an irregular or racing heartbeat, which may last for some time after taking the drugs. Users can experience headaches, blurred vision, restlessness, hot flushes and muscle tension, particularly in the jaw and face, and some people report that their fingers and other extremities have taken on a bluish pallor after using mephedrone. As with other stimulants, the substances tend to act as appetite suppressants. Nausea and vomiting has been reported, particularly if mixed with other drugs such as alcohol or cannabis.

A particularly concerning feature of many reports about mephedrone use is that once users have started using the drugs in a particular session, it is very hard to stop, with compulsive use leading to a number of unpleasant side effects including insomnia, involuntary muscle clenching, panic attacks and hallucinations. In some cases, it seems, regular or heavy use may develop into psychological dependency.

The Law

Since April 2010, Mephedrone is a Class B drug in the UK.

Khat Statistics

Last updated on December 2020

Use of Khat

As khat has not been a controlled substance for very long it was not included in several surveys so, long-term comparisons of usage are hard to make. Also, it has not been included in the latest survey, so it's hard to build a picture of use without statistics.

However, in 2009/10, 0.2% of people aged 16-59 reported using khat in the last year. In 2015/16, 0.06% of this age group reported using khat in the last year. This does show a decrease in use, but there are no current figures to show if use is still on the decline.

Also, it should be noted that a household survey such as the Crime Survey of England and Wales may underestimate the use of substances such as khat, the use of which is concentrated in individuals of a specific national origin.

(Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2015/16)

Mephedrone Statistics

Last updated on December 2020

Use of Mephedrone

When the drug was first asked about in the Crime Survey in 2010/11, 4.4% of young adults said they has used it in the last year. Now, 0.2% of this age group have reported using it in the last year.

0.0% of adults aged 16-59 now say they have used mephedrone in the last year. This number was 1.3% in 2010/11.

(ONS Drug Misuse in England and Wales, 2019/20; British Crime Survey 2010/11)