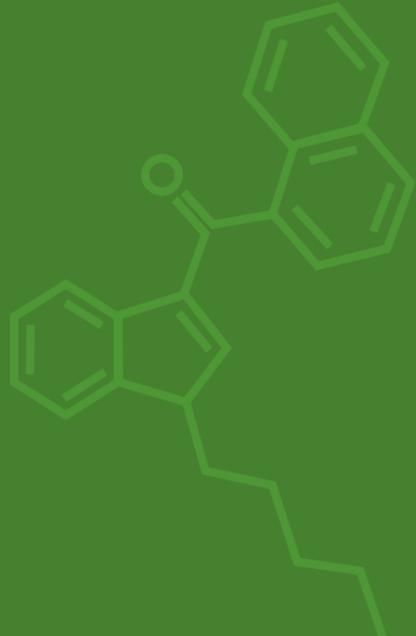


**14**

**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](mailto: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](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net/publications/drug-and-alcohol-directories-services)

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