

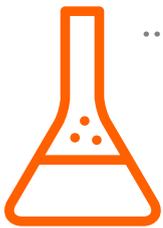
Overview of Synthetics in New Zealand

AT THE HEART
OF THE MATTER,
NZ DRUG
FOUNDATION.

Te Tūāpapa Tarukino o Aotearoa

This guide supports police, health and social services to respond to synthetics in their community. About 600 synthetic psychoactive substances were identified in the past 20 years. Some of these substances are killing New Zealanders and more will continue to be developed. We must be ready to respond.

Synthetic psychoactive substances mostly fall within two categories. Synthetic cannabinoids are typically sprayed onto plant material and smoked, while synthetic cathinones often come as a pill or powder and may be mis-sold as a traditional drug.



Synthetic cannabinoids

(sometimes called synthetic cannabis)

- 5F-ADB
- AMB-FUBINACA
- JWH-122

Synthetic cathinones

(also called bathsalts)

- N-ethylpentylone
- Mephedrone
- Alpha-PVP

Synthetic cannabinoids are killing New Zealanders

Over 50 New Zealanders are suspected to have died after using synthetic cannabinoids in 2017/2018. These substances are unpredictable, toxic and much more harmful than the 'legal highs' that were available in shops until 2014.

Synthetic cannabinoids can cause major life problems

Mental health challenges and psychosis are more likely with these substances. Some users rapidly develop a pattern of heavy or extremely heavy use.

People already facing challenges are most at risk of harm

People may use synthetic cannabinoids because they are cheap and easily available. Some people might want to get "out of it", cope with the struggles of daily life, or use them as a substitute to avoid a positive drug test.

Some synthetic substances are stronger and more harmful than others

It's impossible to know what synthetic substance someone has or how concentrated it is by looking at it. The manufacturing processes mean substances often contain too much or variable concentrations.

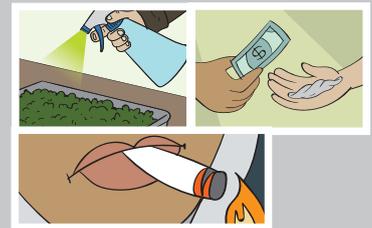
Information about a dangerous batch (where it was found, appearance) should be released to the media and at-risk communities **immediately** so people can avoid it.

People need tailored harm reduction information

It's safest not to use synthetic substances at all. People who aren't using them don't need much detail. But people who are using synthetics need as much information as possible, so they can make safer choices.

Abstinence could be a long-term goal, but a short-term goal to use less in a less harmful way could be more attainable.

RESOURCES



Helping someone after using synthetic cannabinoids

A flip card about how to help someone after they use synthetic cannabinoids, when to call an ambulance, and how to reduce harm.

Did you know: Synthetics

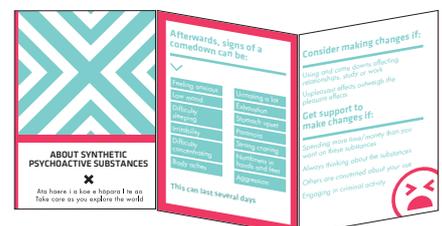
A poster and video with key facts about synthetics aimed at young people with a tool to plan a conversation about it.

nzdrug.org/dyk-synthetics

Synthetics brief advice card

Information about what to expect and how to be safer for young people using substances

nzdrug.org/resources



An effective community response to synthetic drug incidents

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Communities can set up a response group to co-ordinate any actions relating to synthetic drug incidents. This group can work with stakeholders and the media to reduce any further harm and get people the support they need.



Prepare in advance

Establish a synthetics response group with 3-5 local people from Police, health and social services. Meet at agreed intervals to maintain readiness.

Maintain a contact list of frontline organisations to be contacted when a response is initiated. This may include homelessness services, emergency departments, Police, outreach workers, mental health and addiction services.

Distribute Did You Know Synthetics posters and Helping Someone flip cards to at-risk communities.

Authorise the synthetics response group to comment publicly on behalf of the organisations represented when a response is initiated.



Immediate Response

Convene an urgent meeting of the synthetics response group following an acute harm incident or a death.

Get the substance tested by ESR through an emergency department. Make sure this is possible ahead of time.

Communicate to your contact list about the situation. Provide information about the substance involved including its appearance, where its available, and any known harm reduction information.

Respond to media queries with information about what to look out for including what to do in an overdose, and where to go for support.



Ongoing

Reach out to identified at-risk groups with a focus on harm reduction information and tools.

Continue to collect data and feed it into national data sets (ESR, Ministry of Health, District Health Board, Poisons Centre).

Update the public and media as more is known about the substance and how to keep safe.



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Within 2-4 days

Collect data to develop a fuller picture including the number of incidents, locations, the substance and its effects, and at-risk populations.

Identify more organisations that work with people at risk of harm (e.g. schools, alternative education, social services) and provide resources and harm reduction advice.

Distribute a joint media release which updates the media with facts, harm reduction advice and where to go for help.

THE KEY MESSAGES

- 1 Synthetic cannabinoids are unpredictable and very addictive.
- 2 If someone appears unconscious after smoking synthetic cannabinoids, ask loudly if they are ok. Shake them gently. If they are not responsive, dial 111 and request an ambulance.
- 3 People who experience harm from these substances should be provided with care and support.

Use non-stigmatising language

Use people-centred language to make it easier for people to seek support, such as:

Drug users	People who use drugs
Addicts	People struggling with their drug use
Drug problem	Risky, heavy use, unhealthy drug use

Talking to people about synthetics

Give advice that is relevant to the person you are speaking to. You don't need to have this conversation with everyone. But if someone is around people using synthetics or already using them, they need information about safer use and how to access help. **Be honest and open to listening when you speak with them.**

To start talking about synthetics with a person you can:



Have a conversation

Watch or talk through the **Did You Know** resources and discuss what comes up. Use the **Did You Know conversation planner** to get your thoughts together.

What to say:

- Synthetic cannabinoids are unpredictable and very addictive
- Not using synthetic substances is the safest option
- If it doesn't smell like cannabis, **it isn't**.

AND THEN

If they are using, or around other people using



Give appropriate information

If someone is using synthetics, it is a good idea to offer detailed advice. The [Synthetics brief advice card](#) and [Helping someone flip card](#) are good to refer to and pass on.

What to say:

- Ensure one person in a group is not using so they can respond in an emergency.
- Sit down before using synthetic cannabinoids to avoid injury.
- Use less, less often by mixing synthetic cannabinoids with tobacco, using very small amounts, waiting for effects to wear off before taking more, using thin papers and not card.
- Synthetic cannabinoids vary from batch to batch so start slowly with a very small dose.
- If you begin to feel unwell or overwhelmed stop immediately.

Some people use synthetics as an escape from trauma, poverty or emotional distress, and need extra support.



AND THEN

If other support could help



Connect them with the right services

The Alcohol Drug Helpline can let you know what support is available (0800 787 797) or you can look at Healthpoint.co.nz for services in your area.

What to say:

- Most people experience withdrawal almost immediately after using, which can last days.
- Not using at all is safest. But if you aren't there yet, try using a smaller amount, less frequently.
- Withdrawal can start quickly, so you might need support to avoid using again.
- You should seek professional support if you are finding it hard to stop, having strong cravings, experiencing poor mental health or using more to get the same effect.

Helping someone after they use synthetics

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The newness and number of synthetic substances means there are no substance-specific responses. Treating unpleasant symptoms using general first aid is recommended.

DON'T WAIT

If someone becomes unconscious...

Ask loudly if they are ok. Shake them gently.

If they are not responsive, **dial 111 and request an ambulance.**

Let the first responder know what they have used.

If someone is out of it...

People are often very out of it after using synthetic cannabinoids. They may collapse or “drop”, foam at the mouth or experience temporary paralysis.

- ▶ Stay with them
- ▶ Find a safe place to calm them down and reassure them
- ▶ Lie them on their side with airway open in case they lose consciousness



ALWAYS call an ambulance if someone...

- is unconscious
- stops breathing
- has a seizure
- is extremely agitated for longer than 15 minutes
- has chest pain or breathing difficulties for longer than 5 minutes

FOR HEALTH SERVICES:

ONE: STABILISE THE PERSON	Address immediate mental health issues. People are likely to be distressed and agitated.	Support them through withdrawal, which can start within an hour of use. This may require a longer stay for observation.
TWO: IDENTIFY THE SUBSTANCE	Knowing the exact substance will allow more effective treatment Carry out a toxicology screening (with consent).	If they still have the substance get it tested by ESR (most emergency departments have an agreement with ESR and this is funded)
THREE: ONCE DISCHARGED, CONNECT THEM WITH SOCIAL SERVICES	Talk with the person about who can support them not to use because they might have a strong compulsion to use again. Connect people with support services, especially for mental health and housing.	Give them the Synthetic Psychoactive Substances brief advice card . Give them the Helping Someone flip card.

FOLLOW-UP:

People may experience on-going mental health or physical health issues. Ensure they are getting the support they need.

If appropriate, involve the family in the recovery plan for the person.

Pass on information about the substance to the Ministry of Health and the Early Warning System so that the public and services can be warned.