

Overview of Synthetics in New Zealand

AT THE HEART
OF THE MATTER,
NZ DRUG
FOUNDATION.

Te Tūāpapa Tārukiro o Aotearoa

This guide supports police, health and social services to respond to synthetics in their community. Over 600 new synthetic chemicals have been identified as being used or sold for recreational use in the past 10 years. More harmful and dangerous products will continue to be developed.

Synthetics are manufactured chemicals that largely fall within two categories. Synthetic cannabinoids are usually sprayed onto a smokable material, while synthetic cathinones are usually sold in pill or powder form.



SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS

(sometimes called synthetic cannabis)

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

SYNTHETIC CATHINONES

(also called bathsalts)

- N-ethylpentylone
- Mephedrone
- Alpha-PVP

Synthetics have caused around 45 deaths in New Zealand in the past year

These substances are **unpredictable, toxic and much more harmful** than 'legal highs' that were available in shops until 2014. Mental health challenges and psychosis are more likely with these substances, especially with heavy use.

People who are already facing challenges are most at risk of harm

People may use these substances 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 synthetics as a substitute to avoid a positive drug test.

Make sure your community has good support for people who are homeless, people with mental health struggles, and young people.

Some synthetics can be stronger or more toxic than others

It's impossible to know what chemicals have been used or how concentrated they are just by looking. Some are far more toxic than others. The manufacturing process also means each dose, even from the same batch, can be a different strength.

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.

If possible, the substance should be tested so communities know exactly what they are dealing with. The Institute of [Environmental Science & Research \(ESR\)](#) can provide this service. Most emergency departments have an agreement with ESR.

People need tailored harm reduction information

It's safest not to use these substances at all. And people who aren't using synthetics don't need much detail.

But people who are using synthetics need harm reduction advice, so they can make more informed and safer choices. Abstinence can a long-term goal, but short-term goals to reduce harm (using less or in a less harmful way) can be more attainable for some.

This guide details the tailored harm reduction information (see 'effective community response' and 'talking to people') to give to either the general public, people at-risk, or people currently using synthetics.

OUR RESOURCES



Did you know?

Synthetics video, comic strip and conversation planner

These resources provide basic facts about synthetics and help people talk with young people.

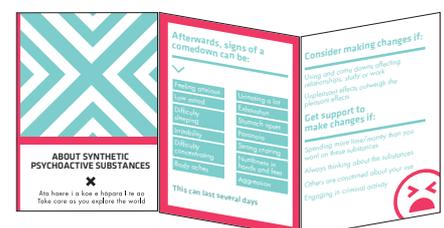
nzdrug.org/dyk-synthetics

Brief advice cards

Synthetic Psychoactive Substances brief advice card

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

nzdrug.org/resources



Effective community response to synthetic drug incidents

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 people from local health, Police, and social services. Meet regularly to review the situation.

Provide 'Did You Know' [Synthetic Psychoactive Substances resources](#) to at-risk communities

Prepare a contact list of key frontline organisations to be kept up to date if there is a serious incident or death (e.g. homelessness services, emergency department, Police, mental health and addiction services, outreach workers).

Obtain permission for this response group to comment publicly on behalf of the member organisations if an incident happens.



Immediate Response

Activate and convene a meeting of the synthetics response group.

Get the substance tested (if possible) by the Institute of Environmental Science & Research (ESR). Most emergency departments have an agreement with ESR and this is funded.

Contact key frontline organisations to prepare for future incidents by engaging at-risk communities and communicating harm reduction information. This could include specific information about the identified substance so people know how to be safer.

Provide media comment about what to look out for (i.e. specific substance information or drug reactions) and what to do in an overdose.



Ongoing response

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

Continue to collate data and feed it into national data sets (Institute of Environmental Science & Research (ESR), Ministry of Health, District Health Board, Poisons Centre etc).

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



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Within 2-4 days

Collate data on the number of incidents, suspected substance and its effects, at-risk populations, and associated harms.

Distribute a joint media release with harm reduction advice and where to go for help.

Contact organisations and support services that work with people at risk of harm (e.g. schools, alternative education, social service) and provide prevention resources and harm reduction messages.

THE KEY MESSAGES

Synthetics are unpredictable substances that can be very harmful and should be avoided.

- 1 If using synthetics, start slow. Don't use alone and stop if you feel unwell. Each dose can be different, even if it looks the same.
- 2 If someone has used synthetics and is having difficulty breathing, experiencing extreme paranoia or agitation, losing consciousness, seizing or foaming at the mouth they need urgent medical attention and you should call 111.
- 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 the **Did You Know?** [synthetics video](#) together and talk about what comes up. You can use the [conversation planner](#) to get your thoughts together.

What to say:

- Not using these substances is the safest option.
- These new products are significantly more toxic than synthetics that were previously available.

AND THEN

If they are using, or around other people using



GIVE APPROPRIATE INFORMATION

If someone says their friends or others in their life are using synthetics, it is a good idea to offer some more detailed advice. The Synthetic Psychoactive Substances [brief advice card](#) is good to refer to and pass on.

What to say:

- With each purchase, start slowly and only use a small amount. Wait to feel the full effects.
- Some synthetics might look like cannabis. But if it doesn't smell like cannabis, it isn't and should be avoided.
- Avoid mixing with alcohol, medication or other drugs. This can greatly increase the strain on the body and the risk of an overdose.
- If you begin to feel unwell or overwhelmed stop immediately and move to a quiet space with fresh air. If you can, ask someone to sit with you.
- Call 111 if you/someone else is having difficulty breathing, extreme agitation, paranoia, losing consciousness, seizures or frothing at the mouth.
- Don't use a plastic bottle or can. Use a pipe or roll into papers instead.

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 a comedown after using which can last a few days.
- Not using at all is safest. But if you aren't there yet, try using a smaller amount, less frequently. The unpleasant comedown can start quickly, so you might need support to avoid using again straight away.
- You should seek professional support if you are finding it hard to stop, having strong cravings, experiencing negative mental health or are using more to get the same effect. They can help you make a plan and provide mental health support.

What an **emergency response** to synthetics should look like

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Use first aid to keep vital body functions going and call emergency services for more support. The newness and number of synthetics mean that there are not substance-specific clinical pathways, however, general first aid helps.

If someone is overdosing, call 1-1-1

AND THEN:

- ▶ Stay with them.
- ▶ Find a safe place to calm them down and reassure them.
- ▶ Lie them on their side with airways open if they lose consciousness.
- ▶ Let the first responder know what they have used.

This is what an overdose looks like:

Fast or irregular heartbeat, difficulty breathing, extreme agitation, loss of consciousness, seizures, foaming at the mouth.

Be aware some people might be aggressive and unpredictable.



DOWNLOAD THE RED CROSS APP

In case of emergency, services, friends and whānau can download this free first aid app. Step-by-step advice is provided for seizures, poisoning and loss of consciousness. redcross.org.nz/first-aid/first-aid-app/

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 patient 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](#).

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.