

# CHECK

(IL)LEGAL RIGHTS

2021

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## DISCOVERING (IL)LEGAL HIGHS

New psychoactive substances, also called as 'legal highs', are an increasing phenomenon in the EECA region. The lack of information and research about these substances is creating loads of misleading - and developing new - myths which are affecting people from key populations.

The first issue of the magazine "Check" is dedicated to exploring the topic of new psychoactive substances, existing responses to the emergence of these substances and thoughts of peers from the EECA region.

In the mid-90s, I saw how people cooked shirka from poppy seeds and injected it into their veins. I wondered how it was possible to introduce a prepared brown mixture in the kitchen into the body. Therefore, I refused to try it until powder that can be smoked or sniffed – heroin, appeared. It helped to escape to another reality from stress, caused by perestroika and poverty. The peak of heroin use in my country, Kyrgyzstan, was reached during 2006–2008, and then the number of people dependent to heroin began to decline. As now, people who use synthetic powders back then did not know about the consequences of use, did not know about the risks and what to do in case of overdose. Now the wave is repeating itself: synthetic cannabinoids and cathinones appeared in the EECA region more than 12 years ago. In the countries of the region, spice was legal for several years and was sold as now as a dressing for a hookah. Just like in the 90s, as soon as social upheavals and economic crises manifest themselves, people turn to psychoactive substances for help to adapt to stress. The

persistent political turmoil and the impact of COVID-19 have increased the stress levels due to the escalating problems. As a result, someone chooses alcohol, someone synthetic illegal psychoactive substances. The difference from classical substances is that when using synthetic cathinones (i.e. alpha-PVP), even experienced peer consultants testify that after the first safe injection, all subsequent ones are already difficult to control the purity of the instruments and harm reduction skills. We must consistently, systematically work on improving health and quality of life of people who use drugs, support them in finding work, ensure housing, support in solving everyday and social issues, help to maintain human rights and freedoms. Besides that, it's very important to explore the reasons why people start to use (new) psychoactive substances.

Enjoy reading and exploring (il)legal highs!

**Eliza Kurcevič**  
**Sergey Bessonov**

"CHECK" is a magazine for people who use drugs, experts and advocates working in the EECA region, and those who want to learn more about the drug policy and harm reduction in the region. It is published by the Eurasian Harm Reduction Association (EHRA) and the Eurasian Network of People Who Use Drugs (ENPUD).



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# NOT EVERYTHING THAT'S CALLED "NEW" IS ~~NEW~~

## NPS in the EECA region

### \* definition

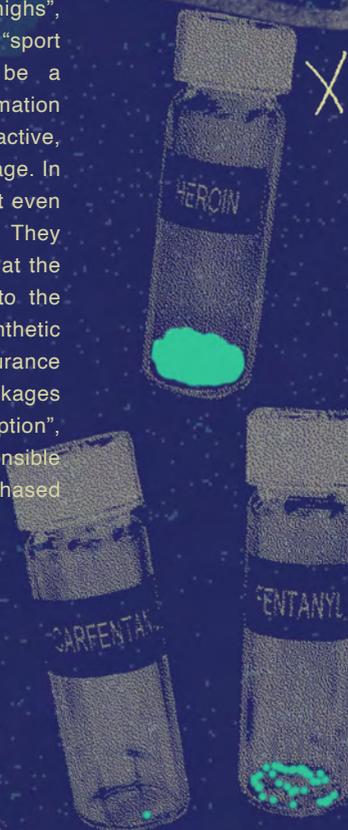
Officially established definitions of new psychoactive substances (NPS) are defining them as new drugs that are not controlled by any of the three United Nations drug control conventions, but which may pose a public health threat. However, don't be fooled by the definition. "New" refers not only to newly synthesised substances, but also to substances which were synthesised decades ago but are now re-emerging on the drug market to mimic the effects of controlled drugs.

### WHY IS CARFENTANIL A NEW SUBSTANCE?

04

One of the examples of such a substance is carfentanil, one of the most potent opioids which was synthesised in 1974 as general anesthetic agent for elephants and other large animals. Human consumption of it was banned because of its potency. Carfentanil is 10,000 times more potent than morphine, 100 times more potent than fentanyl, and 50 times more potent than heroin. However, nowadays, carfentanil is used by people with or without knowing it and poses risks to health and life of people who use drugs. Even though in most cases people don't know that their drug contains carfentanil, some people are using it on purpose because it is cheaper, more accessible and mimics the effects of heroin.

In the drug market, new psychoactive substances are also known as "legal highs", "bath salts", "research chemicals" and "sport supplements". Packages can either be a transparent zip bag with or without information of what is inside; or it can be an attractive, colourful and visually eye-catching package. In most cases, people who use drugs don't even know exactly what drug they are using. They may be informed by a dealer/supplier that the particular drug belongs, for example, to the group of synthetic cannabinoids or synthetic cathinones, but there is no 100% assurance about it. This is why some of the packages have labels "not for human consumption", which gives a clue that the buyer is responsible for his/her/their decision on how the purchased substance will be used.



Research on new psychoactive substance use in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) region has shown that there is no common understanding of what is considered a new psychoactive substance, neither among health professionals nor among people who use drugs. Even substances like LSD, MDMA or amphetamines are considered as new because they recently entered the local (online) drug market and people think that it's new. Even though people think that those substances are new – they are not. Simply because some substances were not available in some countries doesn't make a substance new. Another region-specific issue is that some new psychoactive substances are called with a slang name of traditional drugs. For example, well known "speed", which refers to methamphetamine in some countries of the EECA region, is used to describe alpha-PVP.

The most commonly used groups of new psychoactive substances in the EECA region are:

1. SYNTHETIC OPIOIDS (CARFENTANIL, "FENTA") – MOSTLY IN THE BALTIC STATES
2. SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS (SPICE, JWH) PREVALENT IN ALL EECA, ESPECIALLY IN BELARUS & MOLDOVA
3. SYNTHETIC CATHINONES (BATH SALTS OR JUST SALTS, MEPHEDRONE, ALPHA-PVP, THEY'RE ALSO CALLED BY THE COLOUR OF CRYSTALS) \* THEY ARE PREVALENT ALL OVER THE REGION
4. IN SOME COUNTRIES, KETAMINE & GHB/GBL IS USED, BUT NOT AS MUCH AS OTHER NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES.

In the region, drugs such as carfentanil, mephedrone, alpha-PVP are mainly injected. However, in Kyrgyzstan, mephedrone is used mainly by smoking it. Synthetic cannabinoids, better known as spices, are smoked. Ketamine and GHB/GBL are used orally. We asked people who use NPS from different countries of the EECA region to define new psychoactive substances (what does it mean to them) and received answers based on their own perspective.

"Spices (JWH, JWH-18), mephedrone, alpha-PVP. Alpha-PVP is not a drug, it's a poison. We also call it "sobaka" (in Eng. dog), it means that person acts like a dog – fucking, suspects everybody and growling." Vitaliy, Belarus.

"Salts (alpha-PVP). It's not high/dope, it's shit. I'm trying to keep myself in a distance from it. When you have just a bit of it, then you are looking for something under your feet, as if it will appear. When you have a lot of it – you have a fear, you are hiding from somebody. Your condition is not high/dope, but bullshit." Viktor, Kazakhstan.

"Mephedrone, MDMA, speed (\*alpha-PVP), blots." Natalya, Uzbekistan.

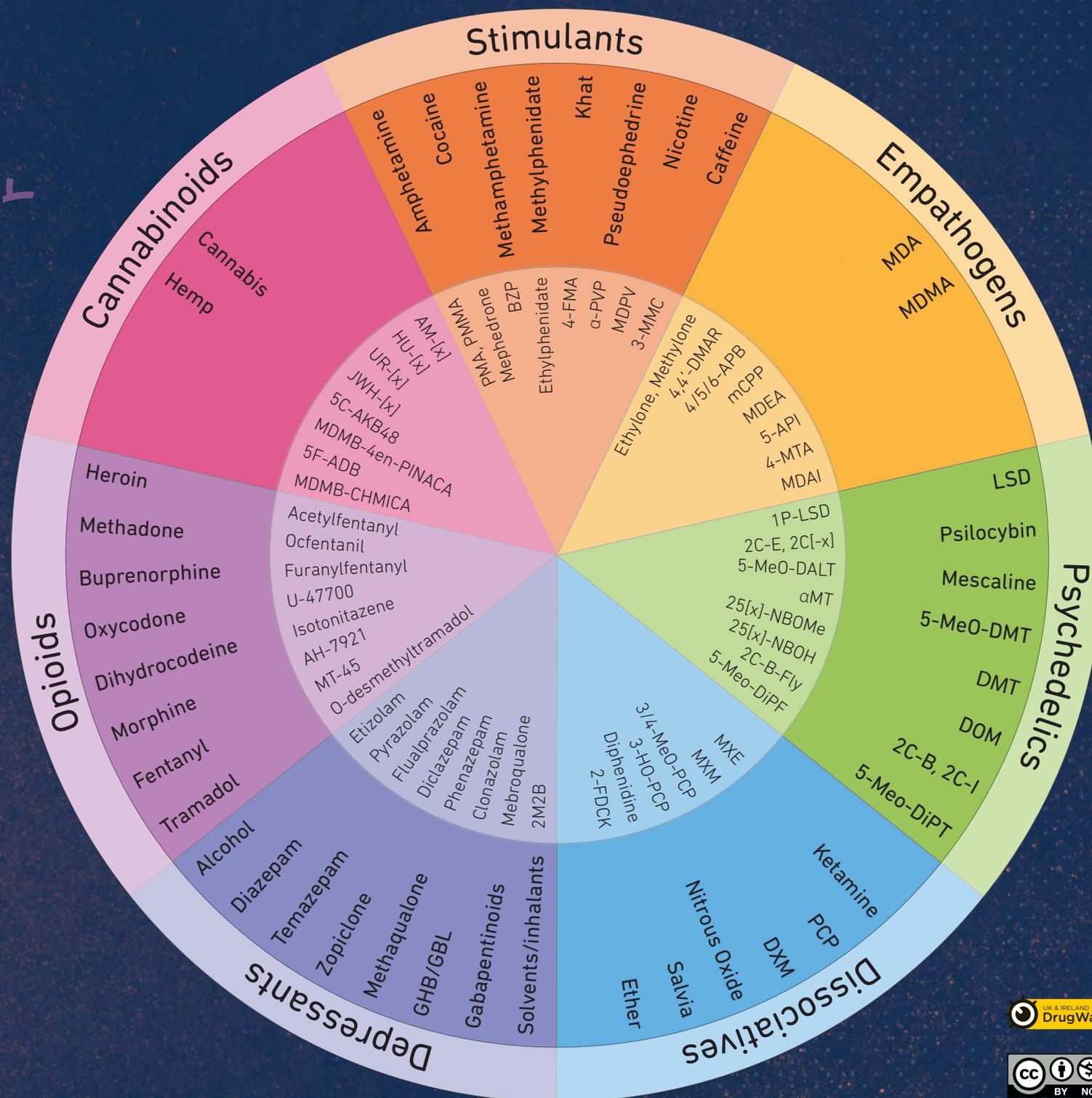
"For me it's a well forgotten old: meph, salts (alpha-PVP)." Ignat, Russia

"New psychoactive substances are substances, which are not first year on our streets, but because of adding into it different substances, they become new drugs, more precisely – new versions with higher risks than the old substances. The main new psychoactive substances in our streets – carfentanil with different impurity." Kestutis, Lithuania.

# THE DRUGS WHEEL

★ Outer ring:  
Established  
psychoactive  
substances

Inner ring:  
Newer  
psychoactive  
substances



A new model for  
substance awareness.

(NPS/Established version  
20/01/2021)

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DrugWatch: an informal association of  
charities, organisations and individuals  
who share an interest in establishing a  
robust early warning system in the UK  
for all types of drugs.



# MEOW MEOW: LOVELY CAT OR ENERGIZING DRUG

Mephedrone, also known as 'MEOW MEOW', was first synthesized in 1929 but was rediscovered in during 2006-2009. It is a new psychoactive substance (NPS) which belongs to a group of synthetic cathinones. It is also well known and sold as 'bath salts', or with more specific names such as mephedrone, 4-MMC, M-CAT, Meph and White Magic. In comparison with some traditional drugs, mephedrone shares some similarities with stimulants and hallucinogens.

While mephedrone is mainly used in recreational settings in Europe, it is totally not the case in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) region. In this region, it is used mainly among people who inject drugs, or who have drug dependence. The main reasons why it has gained popularity among people who inject drugs in the region is due to its cheaper price (in comparison with traditional drugs); it is easily available (especially on the DarkNet and social media channels, such as Telegram); is aggressively marketed; and there are context-driven motives, such as it being harder to detect in the blood and urine, it enhances (sexual) performance and simply because of the unavailability of other drugs of choice. What else should be noticed- is that in loads of cases people don't

even know that they are using mephedrone. This is often the case when people buy MDMA or amphetamine, for example, and these substances contain mephedrone or are sold as MDMA or amphetamine, but are actually mephedrone. Although this can be found out by using a drug checking service, such services are almost non-existent in the EECA region. This is why in loads of cases people don't even know that they are using mephedrone.

### What does mephedrone look and smell like?

Usually it is sold in a form of powder or crystals. That is why, in the EECA region, people call it "muka" (Eng. flour), or just simply crystals, and by specifying the colour of it - blue crystal, white crystal, green crystal, purple crystal, etc.

People compare the smell of mephedrone to cat pee and exhaust fumes.

If buying on the DarkNet, it has a label on the package with the name "Mephedrone (4-MMC)" and a warning, such as, "Not tested for human consumption" or "Not for human consumption".



\* SEE THE CHART ATTACHED BELOW

**Dosage, onset and duration**  
Mephedrone dosage depends on how the drug is used: orally, nasally or by injecting it. How long the effects last depends on how much you've taken, your weight and what other drugs you may have also taken.

**How does it make you feel?**  
Mephedrone affects the central nervous system in a way that closely resembles how stimulants - such as cocaine, MDMA and amphetamines - operate.

|           | DOSE                                   | ONSET OF EFFECTS         | DURATION OF EFFECTS    |
|-----------|--|--------------------------|------------------------|
| ORAL      | 50-100mg (light) to 150-300mg (strong) | 15-45 min                | 3-4 hours              |
| NASAL     | 15-25mg (light) to 75-125mg (strong)   | 5-10 min                 | 1-2 hours              |
| INJECTION | 10-20mg (light) to 50-70mg (strong)    | 2-3 sec (rush), 15-30min | 5 min (rush), 15-30min |

These substances affect the production of the neurotransmitters called serotonin, dopamine and norepinephrine in your brain. By increasing your norepinephrine levels, mephedrone is influencing your body's 'fight-or-flight' circuitry. Increasing serotonin levels will enhance your sense of happiness. A dopamine increase is triggering an intense feeling of euphoria by increasing activity in the parts of your brain that produce pleasurable rewards.

The most frequently reported effects of mephedrone are euphoria, stimulation, alertness, empathy, sociability, talkativeness, intensification of sensory experiences, visual hallucinations and increased libido and sexual arousal. Adverse effects may include toxicity, overheating, chest pain, teeth grinding, agitation and paranoia, psychosis, hallucinations, elevated heart rate and palpitations and insomnia.

Is it dangerous to mix it with other drugs?

Yes. Especially because you can never be sure that what you're buying is actually mephedrone and not something else.

It is **dangerous** to mix mephedrone with **Tramadol** because it increases the risk of seizures. Avoid using mephedrone with antidepressants that contain **MAOIs** as this will put you

at risk of seizures and heart problems.

**CAUTION** should be taken while mixing mephedrone with **mushrooms, LSD, DMT, and cannabis** because mephedrone increases the level of anxiety and thoughts, which can lead to "bad trips" and other negative experiences. Mixing mephedrone with other stimulants such as **cocaine** or **caffeine** may increase the strain on the heart and cause some physical discomfort. **Opioids** and **GHB/GBL** mixed with mephedrone will increase the respiration

rate and allows to a higher dose of opiates/ sedatives. If mephedrone stops working first, opiates/sedatives, may cause respiratory arrest. Mixing mephedrone with **alcohol** is also risky because the sedative effect of alcohol is reduced and it may lead to excessive drinking with a high risk of damaging the liver and increased dehydration.

YOU CAN NEVER BE SURE THAT WHAT YOU ARE BUYING IS ACTUALLY

ALWAYS WEIGH YOUR DOSE  
GET REGULAR  
CHECK-UPS

## Harm reduction advice

- ▶ Take a small amount to start with and wait for the effects before deciding whether to take more.
- ▶ Control quantities used in one session (users advise no more than ½ - 1 gram in 24 hours).
- ▶ Always weigh your dose; the best way of doing this is by using a milligram scale.
- ▶ Avoid using alone and be clear with friends about what you are using.
- ▶ If you are injecting – rotate injection sites to allow them to heal and reduce scarring. Always use sterile syringes and needles, inject properly, don't share with anybody and don't reuse needles. Use only sterile water or water that's been boiled in a kettle and allowed to cool.
- ▶ Mephedrone is very damaging to your nose. Taking it orally is the less harmful option but if you do decide to snort it, make sure to rinse out your nose, have your own snorting kit, don't share with others and don't use banknotes.
- ▶ Ingest within a capsule / cigarette paper – "bombing".
- ▶ If you're dancing, remember to drink a pint of water each hour to avoid dehydration. Take breaks from the dancefloor to avoid heatstroke.
- ▶ Avoid mixing mephedrone with other drugs, such as DMT, mushrooms, LSD, cannabis, opioids, GBL/GHB, cocaine, MAOIs, caffeine and alcohol.
- ▶ Get regular check-ups for sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections.
- ▶ If someone is overheating, take them to a cooler, calmer place.
- ▶ If someone collapses or becomes unresponsive, seek immediate medical attention.
- ▶ As with most drugs, becoming tolerant to its effects is a sign that your brain chemistry is being changed by the drug and that you are at high risk of dependence. Try to avoid repeated exposure to it and make sure that you take breaks in between your using sessions.

Tolerance of using mephedrone builds quickly. This means that each day a person needs a bigger dosage and more of the substance for the session.

When injecting, people may inject more frequently than is typical for heroin. Some people in the EECA region have reported up to 25-30 injections per night.

## HARM REDUCTION to PEOPLE WHO USE NPS WORKS

Interview with Alla Iatco

Alla has over 20 years of experience in HIV prevention and harm reduction in the Republic of Moldova. Since 2000, she has successfully been leading initiatives to work with people who inject drugs. From 2004, Alla has been actively involved in the creation and operation of the Harm Reduction Network in Moldova which is known as the Union of Organisations Working in the Field of HIV Prevention and Harm Reduction and today holds a leading position in it.

X **Alla, please tell us what is the current drug scene in Moldova and what psychoactive substances are used by clients of harm reduction projects in the country?**

In this respect, Moldova does not differ from its neighbours. In Ukraine and neighbouring countries, we note an ever-increasing rate of NPS use. We, the Union of Organisations working in the field of HIV Prevention and Harm Reduction, work in the north of the Republic of Moldova. Large cities, such as Chisinau and Balti, are full of synthetic cathinones ("salts") and synthetic cannabinoids (spice). But in small towns, people continue to use drugs that we met 7-10 years ago, and they themselves prepare

them at home. People of different social classes and age use it; a lot of young people. This shows that harm reduction services must be tailored to each region based on the needs of the people to whom the programme works.

→ **In the past few years, it has been seen that people are using NPS more and more. What are the reasons for this?**

Because they are cheaper and easier to obtain. There are also fewer problems with the police, since most of them are not included in the table of prohibited substances and, in addition, there is no technical expertise of these substances on the ground, including no tests to identify them. As a result, for little money, you

can quickly buy a substance online that will not be found in any analyses. All this makes NPS popular among young people and other population groups.

★ **Since the beginning of this year, you have started providing harm reduction services specifically for people who use NPS. Why did you start doing this and what are these services?**

We began to notice that people who come to our harm reduction centre do not take syringes. They take condoms and hygiene bags, they can drink tea, coffee, but they don't need a syringe. We started to analyse these cases and realised that these people do not use drugs; they do, but in other ways. And

there were more and more such people. Since they tend to smoke, sniff, swallow substances, we decided that we needed something to offer besides syringes. Otherwise, our services will lose their attractiveness and we will not be able to test them for HIV, provide advice on overdose, etc. As a result, in 2019, together with country experts, we proposed to those responsible for HIV programmes to include the ability to provide harm reduction services to people who use psychoactive substances in a non-injecting way. And since 2020,

expanded harm reduction services have been included in the national quality standard for HIV prevention programmes in Moldova. The package of services for such people includes a glass tube, a nasal spray, heart drops, there is calcium and hygienic lipstick, condoms and lubricants. If they are injecting NPS, then we add the necessary preventive materials there.

**\* Do you have specially trained outreach workers who work specifically with people who use NPS?**

Our outreach workers are not divided into those who work only with people who use NPS, or only with people who use "classic" substances. They work primarily with people, no matter what substances they use. That being said, it is important to note that there is more online work. And this is not only because of COVID-19, but to a greater extent

**OLEGA**

"I can be called a person with extensive drug use experience. Recently, I have been 'sitting on salts'. Why? They are the most affordable. As for the package of services, I can say the following: there is a convenient tube. Its use can motivate the injector to switch to non-injection. Pleases the presence of vitamins, corvalol, glycine and valerian. It is clear that not every one of us can buy it at a pharmacy. Note that sleep is important to us. And Corvalol allows you to fall asleep. But I would also add a muscle relaxant, panangin, and something for cramps."

because our customers buy, communicate, and consult in the online environment. In order to keep in touch with them, we created our own Telegram channel and also joined various thematic online groups where we periodically publish information on harm reduction. We equipped our "peer" consultants with smartphones so that they could promptly respond to inquiries and provide the necessary assistance. Those who were older had to be trained in how to use online resources, including the language of communication.

Mephedrone, flour, snow



XIM-spice, struzhka



Emoticon is an online language that uses emoji. We heard that UNODC was doing a dedicated online workshop on this topic. Can you tell us more about this? This training is one example of how we improve the professional level of our team. An emoticon is a form of communication not only with the help of emojis, but also with symbols, memes, gifs, etc. It is easier and safer for young people to communicate on the Internet. Within this system, they use different symbols for psychoactive substances. And in order to become accepted in this community, you need to know and use this language correctly.

We are grateful to everyone who agreed to talk with us for a frank conversation.

White/blue crystals



Do you have any future plans to expand services for people who use NPS? We dream of opening a safe room. It is important that people can access harm reduction services on time in a safe environment. We wrote a letter to the Balti City Hall and have already received support. The task now is to find resources for its work. But I'm sure we will succeed.

Alpha-PVP/VH@ salts, SK Fialka



"I used to use opium. But each time it becomes more difficult to get. Therefore, I switched to "salts". They are available. I understand that this is an expensive pleasure. But my friends and I are collecting money together so that we can get out of the situation. For harm reduction services, I can mention a glass tube. Nasal drops are also very useful - they help not to dry out the mucous membrane. This package helps people like me not to use lamps and foil; the risk of HIV infection is also reduced. When you have spent all your money on "salt", then there is no money for supporting medicines. This is where the harm reduction package is very useful. More doctors should be involved in the harm reduction programme, and we need to have sleeping pills or sedatives in our pockets so that we cannot use drugs. Communication is necessary: urgent help and quick contact..."

Mikhael

# THE BASIS OF HARM REDUCTION FOR INJECTING NPS USE

OR WHAT SHOULD BE ON THE TABLE



2

## 2. DRY SWAB

Use a dry swab **after** injecting. If a dry swab is not available, use a clean dry tissue or paper towel.

3

## 1. ALCOHOL SWABS OR HAND SANITISER

Wipe your hands and surface with an alcohol swab in one direction if you don't have soap and water.

## 3. PILL CRUSHER OR CARD

If drugs need to be crushed first, try crushing them using a sterile tool (blunt end of the syringe, two cookers/ spoons or a pill crusher). The finer the particles in the powder, the easier they will dissolve in water. To convert the crystal into powder, plastic cards may be used. Don't use ATM cards or other cards that are in constant use. Have two separate cards for crushing substances that can be wiped clean with an alcohol swab.

## 4. CLEAN NEEDLES AND SYRINGES

2mg and 5mg syringes and needles of different diameters and lengths can be used to pull up the solution and for injecting. It is better to change needles to reduce damage to veins. The reuse of any injecting equipment (needles, barrels, spoons, filters, water) can result in bacterial infection leading to abscesses, cellulitis and septicemia. Needles and syringes are for personal use and should not be shared. Sharing increases the risk of transmitting HIV, hepatitis B and C, and other infections.

## 5. WHEEL FILTERS

No matter how you dissolve the crystals, the microcrystals still remain in the solution, that may cause a blockage in the vein, resulting in possible limb amputation. All substances that have a crystalline structure must be pulled in through a high-quality filter. Cigarette filters, cotton wool, tampons and dried swabs are not sterile and

## 6. STERILE WATER

To dissolve drugs, you need water. Only use sterile water to reduce the risk of infection. The unused water should be thrown away because bacteria can get in and start to grow there. Distilled or spring water is not sterile and may contain more bacteria than tap water.

## 7. COOKERS OR SPOONS

Drugs can come in a powder or crystal form but need to become liquid for injecting. The drug should be dissolved in a heated spoon to kill bacteria / mold / yeast and fungi. Don't forget to cool the drug solution before injecting. Kitchen spoons, bottle caps or the bottom of pop cans are not sterile and increase the risk of contaminating the drug solution and/or the needle which can lead to infection. Reusing or sharing a cooker puts people at risk of HIV and hepatitis C and B. Cookers should never be shared or reused.

should only be used as a pre-filter to remove large particles and other debris before using a wheel filter. Never use filters from tailor-made cigarettes as they contain things like glass fibres, bleach and other chemicals. Wheel filters take out what you don't want floating around your bloodstream, including tablet binding agents, plant matter, fungi and bacteria.

## 8. DRUG CHECKING REAGENT KIT

Before preparing/using your drug of choice, test it with a reagent kit. Reagents should be used as a presumptive test to screen certain drugs for adulterants. These tests are not 100% conclusive but can assist you in reducing the risks associated with substance use.

## 10. FENTANYL TEST STRIPS

Fentanyl testing strips can detect fentanyl and most of its known analogues, including carfentanil. However, they cannot detect all of them. A negative result does not guarantee your drug sample is free from all synthetic opioids.

## 11. DRUG SCALE

Scales are needed to control the amount of a substance which you are planning to use. Please keep in mind that in the EECA region, having a scale may incriminate you for selling drugs.

## 9. TOURNIQUETS

Tourniquets can make veins more visible and easier to access and are for personal use only and not to be shared. The safest tourniquets are smooth, easy to remove, thin, flexible, non-latex and with a non-porous surface. The smallest amount of blood can remain on a tourniquet, which can put others at risk of hepatitis C and HIV transmission.

## 12. TIMER

When using drugs, sometimes you may get lost in time and do not understand when the last injection was made. You need to set a timer for at least 1.5-2 hours between doses so that you know exactly how much time has passed since the last injection.

## 13. DISPOSAL BOX

Used harm reduction supplies should be safely disposed in a strong container, preferably a sharps box. Protecting the community and people who use drugs from needle stick injuries and injuries from sharp pieces of damaged supplies is important, as they could transmit HIV, hepatitis B and C.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 14. WATER AND SNACKS (preferably sweet) | To stay hydrated and happy!   |
| 15. GELATINE/ VEGAN CAPSULES            | In order to reduce injecting drug use, people may use gelatine capsules as an oral alternative to drug application for those injecting drugs. |
| 16. MAGNESIUM                           | Some NPS (mainly stimulants) can have a side effect - bruxism. Magnesium helps to deal with bruxism by relaxing the jaw muscles.              |
| 17. EYE DROPS                           | It may help to remove red eyes.   |
| 18. DRUGS FOR HEADACHE PAIN RELIEF      | Some NPS may trigger headaches. So simple drugs for a headache should be available.   |

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 19. NALOXONE                       | It is a life-saving tool to help reverse the effects of an opioid-based overdose. It does work on fentanyl and carfentanil, but multiple doses may be needed and it needs to be administered very quickly.  |
| 20. INFORMATIONAL LEAFLET/ STICKER | It should include information about safer drug injecting practices and - most importantly - contact details of a peer who will be able to support a person in case of overdose or any other issue.  |
| 21. CONDOMS AND LUBRICANTS         | Some NPS, such as mephedrone, are injected to enhance sexual activity. However, if not done safely, it may increase the risk of blood-borne virus transmission and sexually transmitted diseases. Thus, condoms and lubricants should be used while practising sex. |

**\* IMPORTANT**  
BEFORE PREPARING YOUR SPACE, WASH YOUR HANDS WITH SOAP AND WATER FOR AT LEAST 20 SECONDS. IT WILL HELP YOU TO AVOID INFECTION.



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# WHOEVER TAKES RISKS, S/HE... USES THE DEVIL KNOWS WHAT

The UNODC Early Warning Advisory (EWA) was established in 2013 as a response to the emergence of NPS at the global level. Until December 2020, 1,047 unique NPS were reported to the EWA by 126 countries, with 71 of these unique NPS reported in 2019. These numbers prove that manufacturing in the drug market is diverse and there is no guarantee of the quality or composition of drugs. Through many centuries, people have used drugs and they will continue to use them. But maybe it's time to ensure the safety of people who use drugs?

Nowadays, lots of drugs possibly contain adulterants and contaminants which sometimes can lead to unintended health consequences. And while our governments don't want to protect citizens by regulating drug markets, then at least they can support drug checking services that aim to improve the health and safety of people who use

psychoactive substances. Just a few years ago, drug checking was something "new", or "odd", in the EECA region, but now more and more harm reduction advocates speak about it as an integral part of existing harm reduction services. Lots of people know that the most accessible way to check psychoactive substance is to check it with a reagent kit which can be purchased online. You buy what you need (there are many different reagent kits), the supplier sends it by mail, you receive it and check it in a safe environment. A more professional option is to check the drug in a laboratory using advanced technologies, but unfortunately in the EECA region it seems that only law enforcement agencies can check your drugs...when you are arrested.

**What is drug checking?**  
Drug checking (also known as pill testing) is an evidence-informed harm reduction tool

that allows people who use drugs to help identify the substance that they intend to take, and to make more informed and safer decisions about their consumption. It does not promote illicit drug use or claim that it eliminates harm. Drug checking won't eliminate the harm, which some of the drugs can cause, but it can help a person who uses drugs to avoid ingesting unknown or potentially dangerous adulterants. As well, it can warn person about possible risks and let a person decide about safety measures which should be taken while using a particular drug. It's better to use a test kit than not to do so at all.

**Why do we need drug checking?**  
Drug checking services not only inform about potential risks and harms of use, but also enable people who choose to use drugs to make informed choices. If drugs are shown to contain unwanted or unknown chemical

compounds, people might not use them at all. Law enforcement responses, which criminalize people who use drugs, have been proven to not work and are costly. For example, the presence of sniffer dogs at festivals is making people choose to take drugs earlier, faster, or in higher quantities. All this can lead to serious drug-related accidents. That's why it is important to have an integrated response which includes all key stakeholders (including the police as well as local and national decision makers). If authorities care about the health and safety of people, they need to

support drug checking and to not create barriers for harm reduction organizations that provide such services. Drug checking is not only about knowing the drug to be used. It is an integral part of harm reduction services that also provide information about blood-borne infections and their prevention, about overdose prevention, information on poly-drug use and drug paraphernalia, etc. In this case, drug checking works as a creator of awareness and educates people on the minimization of risks. Drug checking can become an effective tool to monitor

emerging new psychoactive substances (NPS) and to create an early warning system. It can help governments to increase the effectiveness of the response and implementation of warning campaigns. And of course, drug checking is a cost-effective service. Basic reagent tests are of low cost. But what is most important is that drug checking can work as an early intervention and can be part of a full range of services for a person who uses drugs: educational information, counselling and referral to treatment (if necessary).

## REAGENT TESTS: pros & cons

The easiest and most accessible way to check drugs, at least in the EECA region, is with reagent tests. Reagents are chemicals that change colour (are "colorimetric") based on the presence of certain drugs.

| ADVANTAGES  | LIMITATIONS  |
|---|--|
| ✓ Easy-to-use, to manufacture or acquire  | ✗ Limited accuracy in comparison with other drug checking methods  |
| ✓ Low cost  | ✗ Interpretation of the test can be subjective – one person can interpret the colour change differently from another person                  |
| ✓ The results are provided in minutes   | ✗ Reagent tests can detect the presence of a particular substance, but not its purity or dose  |
| ✓ No need for a professional chemist to interpret the results (a trained peer can explain the results)                                      | ✗ Cannot differentiate a mixture of different substances   |
| ✓ Portability: doesn't need any special equipment, nor access to power or other infrastructure which would be hard to get at outdoor events | ✗ There is no test for the detection of fentanyl (only fentanyl test strips)   |
| ✓ Sometimes reagent tests can be used to identify adulterants   | ✗ Consensus is lacking on whether it is beneficial to people who use drugs; false negative results may give an unwarranted sense of security |
| ✓ Can be used as a "hook" for education about drugs and harm reduction  | ✗ Criminalizing laws means that people may not come back for a consultation about the results of a test                                      |

you won't know  
it until you try

How do people know (or don't know) what they are using without drug checking in the EECA region?

18  In the EECA region, there are no government-supported drug checking services. And those that exist (for example, "Young Wave" in Lithuania, "Mandala" in Georgia, or "Drugstore" in Ukraine) are distributing reagent test kits on their own through donor support.

Without having such a service, we asked people who use NPS about how they know/identify that what they are using is NPS and received loads of answers. Most of the answers are that people don't know what they purchased until they try it and understand its effect. Some people say that they are sure of what they are buying because of the same "verified" online shops. But in all of these answers, people can never be sure of what they used because substances are not chemically checked and may contain some dangerous contaminants.

*"JWH is not dissolving in water. You need to take a little bit of powder and put it into water. It doesn't dissolve and become as flour. Alpha and mephedrone dissolve." Vitaliy, Belarus*

*"Only when you try. I had a permanent person and trusted him. Later he was incarcerated. Then I started to take via Telega, Telegram. One time I was taking meph, but there were salts. Basically, you won't know it until you try." Natalya, Uzbekistan*

*"I do trust the person who brings it to me. I'm always taking it from people ~~from~~ in Kazakhstan*

*"Basically, only when you try. Mephedrone has a specific smell..." Ignat, Russia*

*"I'm starting with a small dosage and slowly increase it in order to understand the effect. Very often it happens that you buy one substance and then it turns out to be another. Or there is no quality at all." ~~X~~ Armenia*

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*"Verified shops in Telegram. They always have what I need. Thinking that it is safe to buy through stores in this regard."*

# RESPONDING TO ~~NEW~~ PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCE OVERDOSE

In recent years, the increasing use of new psychoactive substances (NPS) has led to new threats to the health of people who use drugs. One of the greatest concerns is that there is a lack of reliable information and a lack of research on the degree of the threat that NPS poses for drug dependency, overdose and other health consequences. However, anecdotal data from the EECA region shows that overdose from NPS exists and neither

specialists, nor the community of people who use drugs, knows how to respond to it.

New psychoactive substances differ, so do the signs of overdose. In the EECA region, there are two main groups of NPS: synthetic cathinones and synthetic cannabinoids. Thus, this article will review the possible signs of overdose and what actions should be taken to respond to it.

## MAIN PHYSICAL SIGNS OF OVERDOSE FROM NPS:

- ▶ Muscle rigidity and spasticity, meaning an abnormal increase in muscle tone or stiffness of muscle
- ▶ Involuntary trembling, shaking or shivering
- ▶ Fever / overheating
- ▶ Difficulty breathing, shortness of breath, stopped breathing
- ▶ Nausea or vomiting
- ▶ Unrousable (can't be woken up), unconsciousness
- ▶ Seizures

## MAIN PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGN OF OVERDOSE FROM NPS:

- ▶ Confusion or distress
- ▶ Paranoia, fear and panic
- ▶ Agitation and aggression, violent behaviour
- ▶ Suicidal thoughts/attempts



*"Basically, all information is from the Internet. There is also a drug service on Hydra, we take information there and you can write to the doctor."*

**Vitaliy**, Belarus

**T.**, Armenia  
*"We are not trying to contact an ambulance. We have a very repressive drug policy... We drink milk, water. If it's really bad and the person has nothing to lose, we call an ambulance. There was a case when my friend was afraid that his parents would find out, he was afraid to be imprisoned for use. Until the end, he refused the ambulance and died. Parents had found out that he was using anyway. We even have pharmacies connected with the police. You buy a pipette to smoke, two hours later the police come for you."*

| CLINICAL SYMPTOMS & PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF OVERDOSE FROM SYNTHETIC CATHINONES CAN INCLUDE:   | CLINICAL SYMPTOMS & PHYSICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF OVERDOSE FROM SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS CAN INCLUDE:                          |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Tachycardia (when the heart rate is over 100 beats per minute)  | <input type="checkbox"/> Convulsions  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hypertension (when blood pressure is too high)   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Myoclonus (brief, involuntary, irregular twitching of a muscle or a group of muscles) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Arrhythmia (a problem with the rate or rhythm of your heartbeat)  | <input type="checkbox"/> Hyperreflexia (overactive or overresponsive reflexes)  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hyperthermia (overheating)  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Aggression  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Heart palpitations (feelings of having a fast-beating, fluttering or pounding heart)                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Psychosis  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Convulsions (uncontrollable shaking that is rapid and rhythmic, with the muscles contracting and relaxing repeatedly) | <input type="checkbox"/> Anxiety  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spasms (sudden involuntary contraction of a muscle)   | <input type="checkbox"/> Panic  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Respiratory failure   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Paranoia  |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Chest pain   | <input type="checkbox"/> Seizures   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Muscular contractions   | <input type="checkbox"/> Tachycardia  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Nausea / vomiting   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Nausea / vomiting   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Panic attacks   | <input type="checkbox"/> Heart palpitations   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Agitation  | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Loss of control of body parts   |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Paranoia   | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Tremor  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Violent behaviour and aggression  | <input type="checkbox"/> Hypertonia (a condition when it's hard to move arms or legs because they are stiff)              |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Suicidal thoughts / attempts   |   |

# \*OVERDOSE RESPONSE:

If you think someone has overdosed, please consider the following:

*THE first things you SHOULD DO ARE:*

- stay calm
- calm the person who is possibly overdosing and be reassuring - don't scare her/him or chase after them
- try to find out what drug they have taken
- stay with them

*IF THEY'RE anxious, tense or panicky YOU SHOULD:*

- sit them in a quiet and calm place
- keep them away from crowds, bright lights and loud noises
- tell them to take slow deep breaths
- stay with them

*IF THEY'RE really drowsy YOU SHOULD:*

- sit them in a quiet place and keep them awake
- if they don't respond, or they become unconscious, call an ambulance immediately and place them in the recovery position
- don't scare, shout or shock them
- don't give them coffee to wake up
- don't put them in a cold bath to "wake them up" - this wastes time and there's a risk of drowning

*IF THEY'RE unconscious or having difficulty breathing YOU SHOULD:*

- Immediately phone for an ambulance
- Place them into the recovery position
- Stay with them until the ambulance arrives
- If you know what drug they've taken, tell the ambulance crew immediately, it might help them get the right treatment faster
- In case of overdose from opioids, use Naloxone (if you have it)

In most of the EECA countries, people are afraid to seek help by calling an ambulance because of repressive drug laws. It may happen that the ambulance will call the police and - after saving a person's life - that person will be arrested because of the consumption of illegal drugs. Or, as is the case in Belarus, there is also a possibility that a person

who calls an ambulance may be persecuted for the fatal overdose of a person whom s/he tried to save. According to the law, a person may face 12 to 25 years imprisonment if s/he is intoxicated with psychoactive substances during the call. Police interpret "intoxication" and the presence of illegal drugs at the incident site as selling and distributing. As there is a lack of knowledge and understanding on how

to respond to overdose from NPS, people who use drugs are trying different methods to help their peers which have not been confirmed by any research and are dangerous (such as cutting veins to let the blood out in order to lower blood pressure). Even though it may be challenging to respond to overdose from NPS, here are few tips on how you can help a person in such a case.

CHECK  
IT OUT!

enpud.net\*  
harmreductioneurasia.org