

## Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) – what you need to know

### *A guide for professionals and workers in the city of Newcastle-upon-Tyne*

#### **Key messages**

- **NPS are not safe and are associated with a range of harms**
- **Help and treatment is available for NPS use, including withdrawal management**
- **The effects of using NPS increases people's vulnerability to social harms such as crime; exploitation and violence**
- **NPS use or possession should be treated like any other illicit or controlled substance, and may lead to prosecution**
- **If someone becomes unwell you should always phone an ambulance or take them to A&E to get assessed as they may require lifesaving treatment**

#### **What are Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS)?**

NPS are usually referred to as 'legal highs' or 'legals', but are also commonly called 'lethal highs', 'smeg', or 'spice'. They are a group of synthetic compounds that have been designed to mimic the effects of controlled drugs because, prior to the introduction of the Psychoactive Substances Act in May 2016, they were not subject to legal regulation. **NPS are not safe and there are some serious known risks as well as unknown risks.**

NPS products can mimic a range of controlled substances, including stimulants, sedatives, hallucinogens and synthetic cannabinoids. There are hundreds of NPS products available that are marketed with brand names that use humour or familiarity to encourage risk taking behaviour and/or irresponsibly promote medicinal benefits such as *Pandora's Box* and *Sweet Leaf*. **The product name gives no indication of the content of the substance** which is likely to be different at each use. The products are usually more potent than the drugs they are mimicking, so users may experience adverse effects with lengthened duration if they are using similar quantities as they would other substances.

#### **Why do I need to know about NPS?**

Supply of NPS has significantly increased over the past few years within the UK and Europe, and specifically within Newcastle since 2015. You may already be aware of this trend directly through your work, or from the media because of the number of serious NPS-related incidents and the demand that this has placed on emergency services.

**NPS are associated with serious physical and mental reactions** and have been linked to deaths across Europe. Common reactions include rapid unconsciousness; slowed movement; an inability to speak; aggression/ violence; seizures/ fitting; breathlessness; kidney damage; hallucinations, psychosis; depression; and paranoia.

Some NPS appear to be addictive and cause many users to experience extreme withdrawals. No one knows the long-term effects of NPS use but there are concerns that they may have physical and mental health implications.

Within Newcastle, NPS users are not currently accessing treatment services despite the majority of users reporting that they want to stop using them. **We need your help to raise awareness of the support available to ensure that people can access the appropriate treatment** and to collectively reduce NPS-related harms in our communities.

### ***So are they legal or not?***

The Psychoactive Substances Act (PSA) was implemented by the government in May 2016. This makes it an offence to *'Produce, supply or offer to supply, import, possess with intent to supply any psychoactive substance (so called 'legal highs')*'. This means **it is illegal to have any involvement in the production or supply of NPS** and those involved will be prosecuted.

It is important to be aware that people will not know what is in the NPS product that they have purchased until the products are tested by specialist toxicologists (for the police or in hospital). **The product names are meaningless and home-testing kits are not accurate.**

There are also NPS products which contain specific compounds that were known to be harmful prior to the PSA and these substances fall under the Misuse of Drugs Act (i.e. Class A, B or C drugs). This means that although possession under the PSA may not be an offence (depending on each case); some NPS products are currently controlled under Temporary Class Drug Orders (TCDO). Therefore, purchasing, possessing or sharing any NPS product which contain the substances controlled under a TCDO may also lead to being prosecuted.

### ***Who uses NPS?***

Just like with other substances, people use NPS for different reasons and there is still limited knowledge about who is using NPS and how it may impact people differently. For example, those with established connections to drug markets are more likely to have experienced targeted street selling, whereas young people are more likely to have been influenced by the preceding legal status of the substances.

The best available evidence we have suggests that people most likely to use NPS are:

- High-risk drug users
- Vulnerable young people
- People who use drugs recreationally

NPS are also associated with poly drug use (using NPS in combination with alcohol and other controlled substances). **Mixing substances increases users' risk to serious harms** to their health and further increases their vulnerability within the community.

## ***How do we know which NPS are in Newcastle?***

Between May and July 2016 Newcastle City Council (NCC) Public Health and Newcastle University Wolfson Unit of Clinical Pharmacology tested a range of NPS products circulating in Newcastle that had been seized by Northumbria Police. This research found that:

- All samples with psychoactive properties contained **synthetic cannabinoids** as the active ingredient. Synthetic cannabinoids are linked to serious health outcomes and associated with an increased risk of A&E admission compared to natural cannabis.
- Over half of the samples contained no active psychoactive ingredients and contained only plant/ herbal materials. Products being sold with no active ingredient may exploit users and could influence increased poly drug use.
- The most common active ingredients in the 'psychoactive' products tested were two compounds that have been linked to serious adverse effects including deaths across Europe and in USA.
- NPS products available in Newcastle had significant variation in their content. This indicates poor quality manufacturing and means that there can be no assurance made about what is in each packet of NPS product.
- The product name is meaningless to indicate content and no product name should be discouraged or promoted over others.

## ***What is my responsibility?***

**Ask questions when talking to patients or clients during your standard assessments or contact time, just as you would to identify any other drug or alcohol misuse.** Be aware that people who present with physical symptoms such as difficulty breathing, disorientation or distress may be under the influence of NPS and may need urgent medical care. Extreme weight loss, aggression, paranoia and persistent low back pain may also indicate prolonged NPS use and/or addiction, which we know can be hard to self-manage.

As there are many different products it may seem overwhelming to talk to service users about NPS, but the product name is not important. **Specialist treatment services provide interventions that focus on the drug effect not the substance name.** It may be helpful to know the four broad categories of drug effects: **Stimulants** (e.g. MDMA); **Sedatives/ dissociatives** (e.g. Nitrous Oxide); **Hallucinogens** (e.g. LSD) and **Synthetic cannabinoids**.

If you work with people from groups at increased risk of NPS use or in settings where exposures to NPS are more likely it is important that you feel confident to:

- Provide basic advice to people using NPS (see Key Messages)
- Signpost or refer people to appropriate services or support, depending on your role
- Respond appropriately to people who become unwell under the influence of NPS
- Consider your safeguarding obligations using Newcastle Safeguarding Children Board (NSCB) and Newcastle Safeguarding Adult Board (NSCB) policies and procedures

- Report any information about NPS supply to your manager or neighbourhood police team, as you would with any other illicit substance

If you work or manage a service, such as supported accommodation or a children's residential unit, you should treat the use, identification and supply of NPS as any other controlled or illicit substance. Newcastle's Drug Management Protocol (and Residential Unit DMP) clarifies your responsibilities with this, as well as the response of Northumbria Police.

Use this briefing for basic advice and signposting/ referral contacts. For more detailed information, you can phone one of the drug treatment services or access the resources recommended below, which include contacts for local training information.

### Local support for people affected by NPS use

#### Over 18?

**Lifeline harm reduction service**

**0191 261 4719**

**Lifeline Integrated Service**

**0191 261 5610**

#### Under 18?

**DnA Young People's Service**

**0191 277 7377**

**Online peer support for young people**

[www.legalfails.com](http://www.legalfails.com)

Lifeline work with NTW Addictions (Plummer Court) to ensure appropriate assessment, treatment and case management.

**Carers and families support? Newcastle PROPS 0191 226 3440**

**Northumbria Police** Emergency **999** or Non-emergency **101** [www.northumbria.police.uk](http://www.northumbria.police.uk)

Newcastle User and Carer Forum have developed a leaflet for users that explains the PSA 2016. To receive a free copy please email [andy.hackett@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:andy.hackett@newcastle.gov.uk)

### Further information for professionals

- **Public Health England Project Neptune** - clinical guidance on the management of club drugs and NPS [www.neptune-clinical-guidance.co.uk](http://www.neptune-clinical-guidance.co.uk)
- **Mentor ADEPIS** - free resources for schools on drug and alcohol education [www.mentor-adepis.org](http://www.mentor-adepis.org)
- **Royal College of Psychiatrists One new drug a week** – report on providing services for NPS and club drug users [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/FR%20AP%2002\\_Sept2014.pdf](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/pdf/FR%20AP%2002_Sept2014.pdf)

#### Local Training

A range of alcohol and drug training courses are available for practitioners in different roles. To find a course right for you, please contact NCC Public Health:

Alcohol – Sarah Hulse

[sarah.hulse@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.hulse@newcastle.gov.uk)

Drugs – Rachael Hope

[rachael.hope@newcastle.gov.uk](mailto:rachael.hope@newcastle.gov.uk)

**Online hub for frontline healthcare professionals**

[www.hiwecanhelp.com](http://www.hiwecanhelp.com)

**National resources**

[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)