

'THC vapes' likely to contain other drugs

*Information and advice for local Public Health Teams

BACKGROUND

So-called 'THC vapes' are becoming popular among young people and are illegally available through online platforms, including social media. THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) is the main psychoactive ingredient in the cannabis plant. Possession is always illegal, unless prescribed in a medicine by a doctor.

Using THC has its own risks but vapes claiming to contain it often contain more harmful drugs, such as synthetic and semi-synthetic cannabinoids, often known as 'Spice' (referred to as 'synthetic cannabinoids' here). The effects of synthetic cannabinoids can be very different to those of THC and have contributed to a number of overdoses, and even deaths, in recent years in the UK.

KEY FACTS

- Cannabinoids are chemicals in the cannabis plant that affect receptors in the brain. They include delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). THC is the main substance causing the 'high' when people use cannabis. Synthetic (and semi-synthetic) cannabinoids are chemicals that don't occur naturally in the cannabis plant but have been manufactured and act on the same receptors, but their effects can be very different.
- Illicit vapes may claim to contain cannabis chemicals like THC but may instead contain synthetic cannabinoids or other, even more harmful, drugs.
- Vapes sold with THC or other drugs are not legal or regulated, so they don't go through any quality control. They can look very similar to nicotine vapes and therefore can be hard to distinguish. THC, synthetic cannabinoids and other drugs can also be added to refillable vapes, so without testing the liquid in a refillable vape you can't be sure what is in it.
- Vapes containing synthetic cannabinoids have caused users to overdose and require hospital care. Many of these incidents have happened to children and young people. In some cases, incidents have occurred within school premises.
- Frequent use of THC and synthetic cannabinoids can cause dependence. Synthetic cannabinoids have been reported to cause withdrawal symptoms.
- THC and most synthetic cannabinoids are Class B drugs, which means they're illegal to possess and supply. Possession has a penalty of up to 5 years in prison, an unlimited fine or both. If a vape contains any other drug, the penalty will be based on the classification of that drug, regardless of whether the user was aware or not. In the UK, it is against the law to sell nicotine vaping products to under 18s or for adults to buy them on their behalf.

LOCAL ACTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Put THC vape and synthetic cannabinoid use on the agenda for your **Combating Drugs Partnership (CDP)** 'board' and relevant sub-groups, including those covering prevention and treatment, informed by local data and intelligence.
- Strengthen and work together with your **Local Drug Information System (LDIS)**, identifying ways to improve collaboration between health and mental health care, schools, police, hospitals and other young peoples' services.
- Be ready to put in place a local or regional **Incident Management Team** for outbreaks of harms from THC vapes, synthetic cannabinoids and other drugs. Develop a preparedness plan for THC vapes and synthetic cannabinoids, similar to the one your area has prepared for synthetic opioids in response to **Potent synthetic opioids: preparing for a future threat - GOV.UK**.
- **Mental health services** should use the **ASSIST-Lite** screening tool to identify drug and alcohol use problems and offer brief advice and referral into drug and alcohol treatment. Treatment should address the drug and alcohol use and mental health issues (such as self-medication) through effective partnerships. Services can find out more about how to identify, prevent and reduce drug and alcohol related harm in the **Misuse of illicit drugs and medicines: applying All Our Health** guidance.
- **Drug treatment services** should routinely offer harm reduction and psychosocial interventions to individuals in need and pharmacological interventions in rare circumstances where clinicians assess them as being appropriate. They should routinely ask people who use cannabis/THC about what products they are using and where they purchase them from. They should seek to develop an understanding of why people use and the triggers, circumstances and purposes of that use, and what keeps them using.
- Work closely with the night-time economy (pubs, clubs, festivals, etc.) – including through existing police and licensing contacts – and **education partners** (schools, further/higher education, universities, etc.). Ensure staff are trained in how to recognise signs and symptoms of intoxication from the use of synthetic cannabinoids or other drugs and what to do in an emergency.
- Provide **education** to people who use them about risks and harms from THC vapes.
- Explore options to **test** vapes which have caused any harm or are suspicious. Understanding the cause of harm can help people get appropriate treatment and can help public health and law enforcement agencies respond to the problem more effectively.

HARM REDUCTION

Services should first and foremost help people to avoid using THC vapes and any unlicensed vape. Some people will decide to use them despite the risks. In those cases, harm reduction advice is indicated. **Always ensure harm reduction advice is context, risk and age appropriate.**

Use or adapt the following messages:

- The only way to avoid all risks is to avoid using drugs like THC vapes or others.
- Don't use alone. Do stay with your friends and have a safety plan for if things go wrong. If you're in a group, don't all use at the same time so there is someone available to get help if people go over.
- Start low and go slow. Start with a small puff and wait some time for the effects. Vaping drugs will be felt almost instantly. If someone is unwell, don't hesitate to get help. Call 111 if you or someone else needs medical help, and 999 if you think it's life-threatening (see Information and resources section) and be honest with any first responders about what you or the person attended have taken.
- Avoid using other drugs if using a THC vape, as this is riskier and might make you more ill.
- Never drive or use heavy machinery and stay away from swimming pools, hot tubs and baths after using.
- If you are self-medicating with THC vapes, talk to your GP or call NHS 111 for advice.

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- FRANK offers easy to read information on the risks of THC vapes ([‘Cannabis’ vapes - do you know what you’re vaping? | FRANK](#)) and synthetic cannabinoids ([Honest information about drugs | FRANK](#)) and mixing it with other drugs or alcohol
- FRANK has a local drug and alcohol services directory: [Find drug and alcohol support near you | FRANK](#)
- People, including teachers, parents and children and young people can call FRANK on 0800 776600 or at www.talktofrank.com to find out more and get support
- NHS advice on contacting urgent and emergency care services can be found here: [Find urgent and emergency care services - NHS](#)

