

Despite the risks, mephedrone users in the UK are ready to try the next legal high

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Since mephedrone was made illegal in the UK in 2010, the street price of the drug has risen while the quality has degraded, which in turn may have reduced use of the drug. New research published online today reveals that young people who continued to use mephedrone after it became illegal would switch to a new legal high if it were pure and rated highly by their friends or on the Internet. They would be less deterred by a lack of scientific research on the new drug.

Mephedrone is a synthetic stimulant -- a 'designer drug' -- that became widely used in the UK from 2008 to 2010. Its rise in popularity may have been caused by its legality and ready availability (typically sold online as 'plant food'), and also to the reduced purity of street [cocaine](#) and [ecstasy](#) during the same period. In 2010, because of its similarity to [amphetamines](#) and frenzied media reporting of the harmful effects of the drug, mephedrone was made illegal in the UK and scheduled as a Class B drug. The drug is still available through street dealers and online.

Research published online today in the journal *Addiction* shows that after taking mephedrone, users showed impaired [working memory](#) as well as the typical stimulant drug effects of [euphoria](#), [self confidence](#) and buzzing.

While intoxicated, they also experienced marked craving for mephedrone and typically binged on the drug, taking it repeatedly for an average of eight hours. When drug-free, this group showed higher levels of depression and poorer [long term memory](#) compared to controls using

drugs other than mephedrone.

When asked what factors might influence them to try a new legal high, the same users said they would be drawn to a new drug that was pure and had few short-term or long-term harms. While they would be attracted by positive reports from friends and on the Internet, lack of scientific research on the drug and its legal status were less important factors.

Mephedrone has been the most publicized 'legal high' in recent years, but there are many new compounds currently emerging on Internet markets. In 2010, 41 new substances were detected in the EU, compared with 24 in 2009 and 13 in 2008. Of those 41 new substances, 15 are synthetic stimulants, just like mephedrone. One of these may become the new 'legal high' that current mephedrone users want.

Says lead researcher Tom Freeman of University College London, "Drug users today are attracted to new substances that are pure and have few adverse effects. Lack of scientific research on the effects and risks of new legal highs might explain why young people rely on subjective reports from friends or the Internet when deciding whether to try a new substance. Internet reports may be biased and offer an opportunity for drug vendors to promote their products. As well as encouraging new research, an important harm reduction strategy is for the media and advice websites such as FRANK to provide balanced and up-to-date information on these drugs."

Provided by Wiley

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