

Study of 'khat' use reveals poor understanding of effects and regulation

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Australian states need to clarify inconsistent regulation of the stimulant “khat”, and users need to know more about the negative health effects, a research study has found.

Khat is a plant used as a stimulant in Australia mainly by immigrants from Somalia.

The University of Queensland TC Beirne School of Law today released the report [Law Enforcement and Khat: An analysis of current issues](#), following a two year study on the health impact, societal effects and legal regulation of the use of khat.

One of the authors of the study, Professor Heather Douglas, said research revealed a huge gap in community awareness and regulatory clarity even among users throughout Australia. The findings were based on the input from 19 focus groups of 129 Somali and Ethiopian people in Brisbane, Melbourne, Sydney and Perth, as well as interviews with police in each state.

This UQ study is the first multi-state study into the use of khat in Australia and was made possible through the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund.

“There is still a lot of misinformation in the community about khat, for example some people think it is good for fertility but there is no evidence to support this,” said Professor Douglas.

The study in fact revealed dental hygiene issues (largely due to users consuming sugar cubes and sweet drinks along with khat to take away the bitter taste), as well as concerns over driver impairment and family dysfunction resulting from khat use.

“There should be a much greater public health message out there on this particular drug and there should be much clearer legislation for the same reason. Many people have no idea whether it's illegal or legal,” Professor Douglas said.

“Khat” refers to the leaves of the *Catha edulis* tree. While it has been chewed for centuries by people in countries in the Horn of Africa region for its [stimulant](#) properties, in recent years its use in Australia has increased as more people from the region, particularly Somalia and Ethiopia, have settled.

It is regularly imported to Australia from African countries and is particularly prevalent in Western Australia.

Khat contains the alkaloids cathine, norephedrine and cathinone (the principal psychoactive component), which are all structurally related to amphetamine.

The shrub's leaf is generally chewed, or sometimes drunk as a tea. Where possible, users take the leaves from trees growing in public and private places or import the plant from overseas.

Professor Douglas said a particularly concerning trend that emerged was among immigrant taxi drivers using the drug to stay awake on long shifts.

“Some had given up using khat because they were getting speeding tickets,” Professor Douglas said.

“Initially I started this study after reading an article in *The Australian*

linking domestic violence and khat, however this study has revealed that the link is more nuanced. Usage does tend to take up a lot of time and uses family finances so that can cause dysfunction,” she said.

There was, however, no evidence that would support harsh regulation in Australia, rather the focus tended to be on greater clarity of regulation.

Professor Douglas likened the consumption of khat to alcohol, in that it was used for social occasions and was a cultural practice among sections of the Islamic community that did not allow alcohol. Generally large amounts need to be chewed to have the desired effect.

Recommendations from the research include:

- Clarify state regulation and importation law
- Educate police about khat
- Educate community about the law and health effects of khat
- Conduct further research on health, including the need for human studies
- Conduct further research on how khat affects driving.

To download the 93-page report click [here](#).

Provided by University of Queensland

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