

Four street drugs that could pose the biggest threat to UK public health in 2024

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As with fashion and music, illicit drugs go through peaks and troughs of popularity. There are popular staples, such as cannabis, and more disruptive and transient substances, such as mephedrone. As with [clothing fashion](#), the drugs that most people are able to buy are [determined by](#) the choices of designers, manufacturers, and logistical

operations, rather than consumers.

Predicting how the UK [drug](#) market may change in 2024 relies not only on recent trends in drug use but also on international developments. Geopolitical events in [south-east Asia](#) or [South America](#) are just as important as organized crime activity in cities such as London or Liverpool. We suggest that there are four types of drugs that will be of increasing concern in 2024.

1. Opioids

Heroin sold in the UK is primarily sourced from opium grown in Afghanistan. Any change in the production and distribution of opium has a direct effect on the UK heroin market.

After seizing power in 2022, the Taliban announced a clampdown on opium farming in Afghanistan. While other growing regions have [increased production](#), this has not been at the level of the Afghan crop.

Large stockpiles of opium and heroin stored along trafficking routes have depleted. 2024 will see the impact of this.

The estimated number of people who use heroin has [increased](#) over the past decade, with an estimated 341,032 current users in England.

This is a highly profitable market, and suppliers are adaptable and nimble in responding to changes like these. As a consequence of the shortfall in Afghan heroin production, new, highly potent [synthetic opioids](#) have already emerged to fill the gap. These include the group of synthetic opiates known as nitazenes, which have contributed to the record levels of drug-related deaths recorded in 2023 in the UK.

Increased market penetration of these drugs could lead to a big rise in

deaths in 2024. Worryingly, [misselling](#) as other products and unintentional contamination of other non-opioid drugs could increase the harms further. Government and treatment services must act now to prepare for an increase in the supply of these drugs, as the costs of not doing so might lead to a ["nightmare scenario"](#).

2. Cocaine

Cocaine has never been purer, more affordable and more available to those [who want it in the UK](#). While [levels of use](#) have been relatively stable over the past 20 years, deaths and hospitalizations have increased due the nature of the product on the market and increases in the frequency and length of use.

Unlike other class A drugs, such as heroin, there are few effective treatments, and users tend to be more socially integrated. This means that they are less likely to come into contact with police or present to treatment services.

They may not identify themselves as having a drug problem, despite the effect it may be having on their lives. When [disposable income](#) continues to be squeezed as it is in the current cost of living crisis, powder cocaine (as opposed to crack cocaine) is a drug that will continue to provide good "value for money". Sadly, we predict yet another rise in poisonings and hospitalizations in 2024.

3. Ketamine

Ketamine has been used in medicine as an anesthetic for many years, and more recently as an antidepressant. Taken recreational at lower doses, the drug [induces](#) feelings of detachment and happiness.

This is another drug that has become increasingly [popular](#) because it is cheap, fast-acting and easy to get hold of.

Around [3.8% of young people](#) (aged 16 to 24) report having used the drug. This has been steadily rising over the past decade. Police report that the weight of [seizures](#) of ketamine that they made increased sharply from 187kg in 2021 to 1,837kg in 2022. Drug seizures are often used as a proxy for estimating levels of supply.

A range of problems can develop for those using ketamine in [higher doses](#) or over a longer period, ranging from [mental health problems](#) to [incontinence](#). An overdose of the drug can prove to be fatal.

As with most [illicit drugs](#), combining ketamine with alcohol [increases](#) health risks. Sadly, it is the norm for people to use more than one drug at a time—including alcohol.

Given the widespread availability and [affordability](#) of ketamine in the UK, its use will continue to rise in 2024. Use is concentrated among younger people, many of whom won't be aware of its potential for harm until it's too late.

As with cocaine, there has been a distinct lack of health messaging, advice and support for people who use ketamine. Some youth organizations that have tried to do this have faced unhelpful [national media backlash](#).

4. Benzodiazapines

Benzodiazepines, more commonly known by brand names such as Valium and Xanax, have proved to be popular and dangerous in equal measure. While medical prescriptions have [fallen](#) in recent years illicit [demand](#) and supply has not.

Although doctors have been [encouraged](#) to reduce prescriptions for benzodiazepines, the black market has filled the gap in demand. Unlike legitimate supply, the illicit market has no quality control or reliable information on strength—both of which lead to deaths.

The rapid rise in deaths from [these drugs](#) in Scotland shows regional differences both in the use of drugs and the risks they pose. Reversing this trend in use and fatalities will prove to be difficult in 2024 as there are few signs of a change in demand for, or supply of these drugs.

Can we prevent drug harms?

It is not possible to entirely prevent all the harms relating to drug use and the drugs market, but they can be reduced. 2024 may see the emergence of new drugs or new ways of taking them, but what won't change will be the continuation of more than 20 years of increasing drug-related harm.

In a year of a general election in the UK, there is the danger that drugs policy will be used for political point scoring—signaling to the electorate how tough on crime one party is, or how soft on crime their opponents are. Whatever the outcome of the election, unless there is a clear commitment to long-term investment in responses to [drug use](#), new records will be set in drug-related deaths.

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