

Legal highs

A new bill announced in the Queen's speech could see dealers of so-called legal highs receive jail sentences of up to seven years. Legal highs have received widespread media attention after a rapid growth in popularity and being linked to several deaths in recent years – especially among young people. What should parents know about these drugs and the changes in the law?

What are they?

Legal highs are substances that mimic the effects of existing illegal drugs, like cocaine or MDMA. Often they are synthetic compounds created in labs, with similar composition to banned substances but different enough to get around existing legislation – these are called NPS (new or novel psychoactive substances).

Mephedrone (or M-Cat) was one of the first high-profile legal highs. It rapidly gained popularity as an alternative to ecstasy or amphetamines in 2008 but was made a Class B drug in 2010.

Synthetic cannabinoids such as the now-banned Spice are another common example.

Calling NPS legal highs has made some people think they're less dangerous than banned substances, but often this isn't the case. Some have very powerful effects, addictive potential and are active at much lower doses than other drugs. Also, you don't always know what you're getting.

Experts have done lots of research on most illegal drugs, so there's information available on their risks and harm reduction techniques. But because NPS are by nature new and relatively untested, often little is known about their long-term effects. And it's hard to know exactly what's in them – there have been several reported overdoses after users received substances that were mislabelled and stronger than expected.

How are they sold?

Existing regulations mean NPS can't be sold for human consumption, so often they are marketed as research chemicals, plant food or bath salts. Currently they are sold in high street stores known as head shops – it's estimated that there are around 250 such shops in the UK at the moment.

But despite the prevalence of head shops, it's easiest to get NPS online. A quick Google search turns up dozens of websites selling legal highs. Orders placed online are sent through

regular post, making NPS easily accessible to anyone with a credit card and an internet connection.

What will the ban do?

The government's plan will target dealers, making it an offence to produce, distribute, sell or supply 'any substance intended for human consumption that is capable of producing a psychoactive effect,' with exemptions for alcohol, tobacco and caffeine, as well as food and medicines. Possession of NPS for personal use would not become illegal.

Ireland introduced a similar ban in 2010. The Irish Garda reported that there were previously 102 head shops in the country. After the ban these had 'virtually disappeared'.

Many leading drugs organisations, such as the Angelus Foundation, welcome the plan, saying it represents an important recognition of the dangers of NPS and will end the high street trade in legal highs. But it's unclear whether the ban will be able to effectively target the online market, with many websites hosted outside the UK.

With the possibility that young people will still be able to get NPS online or from dealers acting illegally, it's worth making sure your children know about the risks. For more information on NPS and tips on talking to your child, the [Angelus Foundation \(link is external\)](#) and [Talk to Frank \(link is external\)](#) are good places to start.