

'THC vapes' laced with other substances

*Information and advice for educational settings

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 substances, 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 particular receptors in the brain, including 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, substances.
- 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 substances 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. Young people should not have these products in schools.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

- Schools have the autonomy to decide which items should be **banned** from their premises. School staff can search pupils for banned items as outlined in the Department for Education's [Searching, Screening and Confiscation](#) guidance.
- Schools are required by law to have a **behaviour policy** which outlines effective strategies that will encourage good behaviour. [Guidance](#) is available to support school leaders and staff with managing behaviour.
- Include education about the risk of THC vapes and synthetic cannabinoids as part of **RSHE curriculum** when teaching about drugs and vaping.
- Ensure **staff are alert** to risks of vapes containing THC, synthetic cannabinoids, or other substances and have clear guidelines on how to approach students and respond to parents.
- Schools and colleges should continue to have regard to [Keeping children safe in education which is the statutory guidance](#). If a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm, a referral should be made to children's social care immediately (and if appropriate the police).
- Have **clear referral arrangements** with your **local adult and children and young people's specialist and adult drug services**, for children or adults who need any help, support or specialist advice in relation to drug use. You can find your local service at [Find drug and alcohol support near you | FRANK](#).
- Know where to refer concerned parents for support. Most local adult and children and young people's drug services offer support for parents, and further advice and support for parents is available from [ADFAM](#). You can find drug and alcohol treatment services in your area at [Find drug and alcohol support near you | FRANK](#) and more information for parents can be found at [Advice for parents & carers | FRANK](#).
- Work closely with your local authority's **Public Health Team** to stay connected to other stakeholders, such as health and social care services, police, drug and alcohol treatment services and other education partners (schools, further/higher education, universities, etc.).
- Every local authority has a [Local Drug Information System \(LDIS\)](#) that collects and shares information on drug-related incidents in the area. Knowing about incidents that can affect your institution can help you be prepared. Likewise, informing stakeholders of any incident in your institution will help others prepare.
- Explore options to **test** vapes which have caused any harm. 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.
- **Higher education** settings, especially universities, should seek to ensure that students have the resources, support and knowledge needed to make informed choices on drugs and reduce harm, including in relation to the use of THC and related products. This can include support from the university's welfare, counselling and mental health services, local GPs services, and or the students' union advice services. Staff should be aware of the harms from fake medicines and of referral pathways to meet need.
- If someone is unwell, don't hesitate to get help. **Call 111 and 999** if you think it's life-threatening. It is important the person who is feeling unwell is honest with any first responders about what they have taken.

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 substances.
- 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 also 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](#)

