

Legal Highs in the UK: overview and results of a user survey



Presented to
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Presented by
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Background

- Why legal highs?
- 346 Products available in the UK
- Pills, smoking mixes, plant material
- Stimulant, hallucinogen, CNS depressants
- Average price pp GBP 9.69 (Range 1.75 – 54.99)
- BZP, Spice, GBL soon to be banned!



Background

- Why is the UK important?
- Main online source of legal highs to Europe (EMCDDA 2008)
- 2nd largest online source of legal highs to the USA (Dennehy 2005)





Research questions

- Who uses legal highs?
- Why do they use legal highs?
- Where do they purchase/source legal highs?
- How do they use legal highs?
- Do they experience harmful effects?

Methods

- Web based survey
- Advertised in 13 user forums
- www.legalhighsurvey.co.uk hosted by SGUL
- 8 sections, 99 questions
- 10-15 minutes
- Participants anonymous
- Granted Ethical approval by UCL ethics committee



Legal Highs in the UK

Thank you for participating in this survey. It is simple to complete and should take about 10-15 minutes.

To view the details of this survey and the terms of the study press the "back" button on your browser or click on the following link : portal.sgul.ac.uk/Members/mschmidt/introduction

Please Note: The survey is now open!



Question details

I consent to take part in this survey and confirm I meet the eligibility criteria* (Required)
*I live in the UK, am over 18, and have used a "legal high" product at least once in the past.

Yes



Problems

■ Response rate

■ Hostility

"i can see where this is leading to.....

a media look on legal highs trying to get them banned from the negative feedback from users. anything overdose wise or mental health related from legal highs will get them banned too quickly.

don't trust the government, media, journalists and even the cops, they all lie to u."

■ Multiple submissions

■ Sabotage!

"Whatever you do, don't use proxies and fill it out a few times with random and bogus information, as that would ruin the survey.

I haven't filled this form 4 times in the past day with various details."

Flowchart

Participants recruited ads
in 13 user forums

235 Responses
over 17 weeks

1
Exclusion criteria

234 Responses

41
No data

193 Responses

10
Bogus entries

183 Responses
suitable for analysis



Demographics

Variable	Mean (SD) or n (%)
Age (n=178)	26.19 (7.68)
Sex	(n=179)
Male	142 (79%)
Female	37 (21%)
Ethnicity	
White	170 (95%)
Black	2 (1%)
Indian	2 (1%)
Pakistani	1 (1%)
Other Asian	1 (1%)
Other	3 (2%)
Marital Status	
Married/Cohabiting	57 (32%)
Single	117 (65%)
Divorced/Separated	2 (1%)
Widowed	3 (2%)
Occupation	
Employed FT	78 (43%)
Employed PT	9 (5%)
Self Employed	19 (10%)
Student	49 (28%)
Unemployed	22 (12%)
Permanently Sick	1 (1%)
Retired	1 (1%)

Location (n=175)

Top 10 Cities

Top 10 Cities	n	(%)
London	22	(12%)
Brighton	8	(4%)
Manchester	8	(4%)
Edinburgh	5	(3%)
Reading	5	(3%)
Belfast	4	(2%)
Bristol	4	(2%)
Glasgow	4	(2%)
Leeds	4	(2%)
Norwich	4	(2%)





Health

- Medical conditions 24% (40)
asthma (24), diabetes (2), epilepsy (1), ht (2)
- Mental health problems 18% (31)
depression (20), bipolar (1), social phobia (1), psychosis (1), PTSD (1), anxiety/panic attacks (3), Asperger's syndrome (1), Anorexia nervosa (1), ADD (1)
- Prescribed medication 18% (31)
Asthma inhalers (10), antidepressants (8), OCP (4), opiate analgesics (2), insulin (2), Methadone (2), antacids (1), antiepileptics (1), antihistamines (1), antihypertensives (1), antipsychotics (1), benzodiazepine (2), beta blockers (1), Zopiclone (1).



Why use?

- Curiosity! (73%)
- Legality (44%)
- Online research (39%)
- Recommended by a friend (22%)
- Media (7%)
- Looking for specific effect (20%)

**More than one answer possible*



St George's
University of London

Source

- 73% online from UK
- 24% online overseas
- 45% high street
- 11% festival stall
- 9% friends



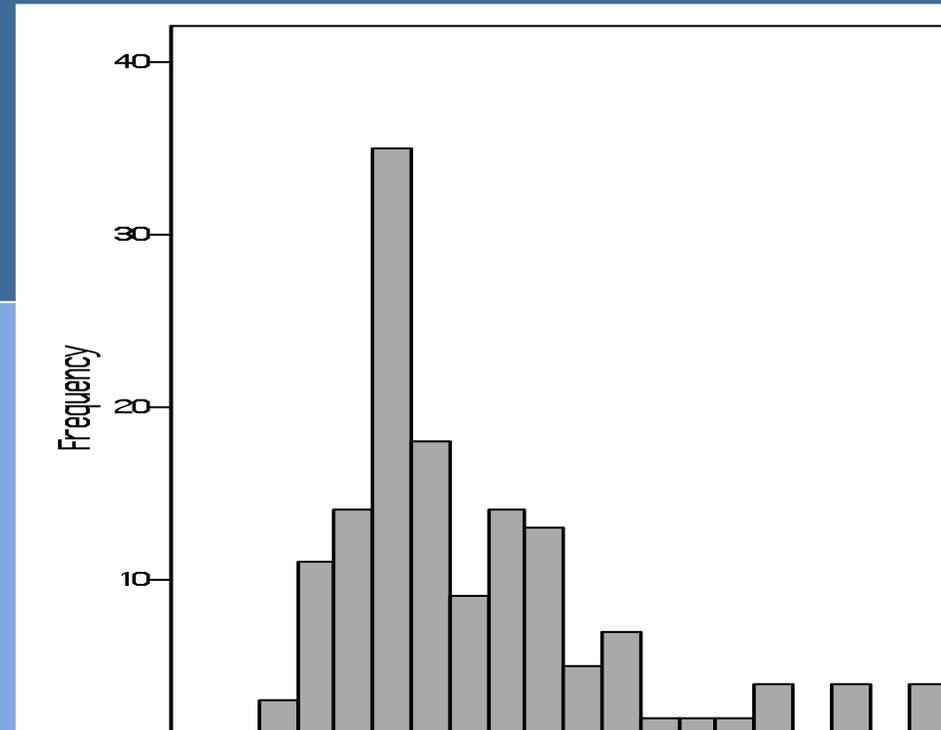
**More than one answer possible*

Experiences

- Ave age of 1st use 22
(Range 13-45, SD 7.068)
- 25% under 18
- 9% under 16

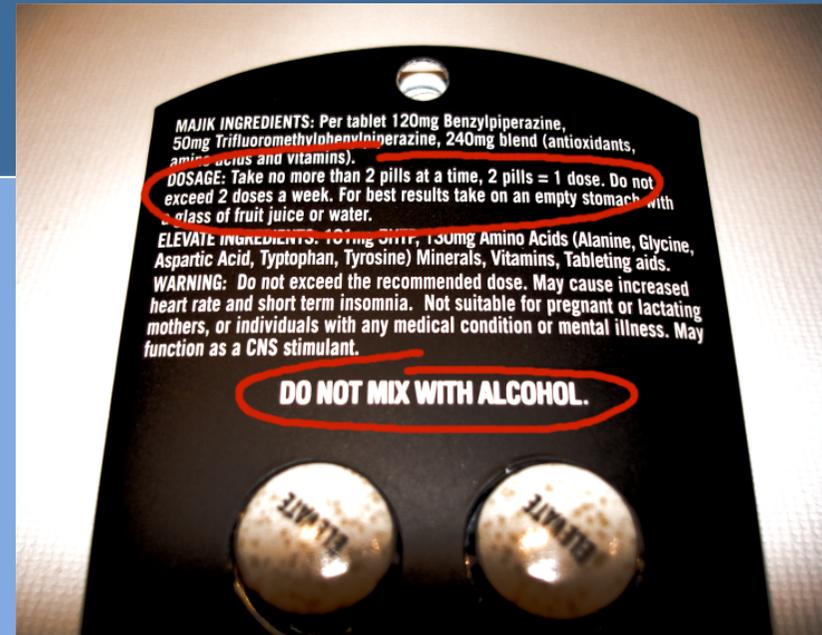
- 96% experienced an effect
- 77% good/very good, 14 % good and bad, 4% bad, 5% none

- 4% experienced adverse effects requiring medical attention
(seizures, accidents)



Behaviour patterns

- 73% always read instructions
- 34% always follow instructions
- 81% exceed recommend dose (sometimes/occasionally/always)
- 87% mix with other substances
- Alcohol (94%), cannabis (36%), ecstasy (30%), ketamine (14%), amphetamine (12%), cocaine (8%)...





Harm reduction

- Stopped illegal drugs now just use legal highs (28%)
- Use both (67%)



Post hoc analysis

Mental Health History vs Rest

- Ave days used past month 10 vs 3 ($p=0.011$)
- Use more in each session ($p = 0.008$)
- No difference in rates of adverse effects, product preference, age first use.



Conclusion

- Wide range of products marketed as legal highs in the UK
- Internet the major source
- Rate of serious adverse effects low
- Risky use common
- Independent information needed