

Spice products

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People generally became aware of “Spice” products in late 2007, when various authorities in Europe began receiving reports of these substances. The term “Spice” refers to mixtures of crushed plant material that are sold in 1 to 5-gram bags mainly via the internet. The plant material is smoked like marijuana, and the effects are similar. The most widely known such preparations go by the names of Spice Gold, Spice Silver and Spice Diamond. There are many similar preparations on the market, with names such as Zohai, Ex-ses, Dream, Yucatan Fire, Sence, Smoke, Genie, Spicey, Spice Arctic Synergy, Spice Tropical Synergy, Spice Egypt, and ChillX.

According to the labelling information on Spice products, the plant material may include herbs with Latin names such as *Canvalia maritima*, *Nymphaea caerulea*, *Scutellaria nana*, *Pedicularis densiflora*, *Leonotis leonurus*, *Zornia latifolia*, *Nelumbo nucifera*, *Leonurus sibiricus*, *Althaea officinalis* and *Rosa canina*. Many of these plants have intoxicating effects, and in theory the effects of Spice products would be the result of the plant materials they contain. Research has shown, however, that Spice products actually contain synthetic cannabinoids which produce the effects similar to cannabis.

The synthetic cannabinoids are added to the crushed plant material at a later stage, since the plants themselves do not contain those substances naturally. These cannabinoids are created in a laboratory so that their chemical structure is similar to the active ingredient in cannabis, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). The most commonly used synthetic cannabinoids in Spice products are JWH-018 and CP 47,497. Some other synthetic cannabinoids have been found in Spice products that have been analysed.

Several dozen synthetic cannabinoids have been identified, some of which were originally intended to be used as medicines but were later found to be unsuitable for medical use. These substances which were created in laboratories and intended to produce an intoxicating effect are called “designer drugs”.

Synthetic cannabinoids are also sold over the internet in virtually pure powder form, as is the case with other designer drugs. The most likely reasons why Spice products were developed in the first place are to make them easier to ingest than the pure substance and to make the work of authorities more difficult. Cannabinoids that have been added to plant material have been shown to be much more difficult for authorities to detect than cannabinoids in pure powder form.

The popularity of Spice products has been in a completely different class to other designer drugs. There are certainly many reasons for their popularity, such as their low price, appealing packaging, ease of use and an ostensible feeling of safety, since these preparations are marketed as natural combinations of herbs – in contradiction of their actual content.

As with other designer drugs, not much is known about the effects of synthetic cannabinoids. There is no scientific data at all on the effects of long-term use. In a way, users of designer drugs are serving as guinea pigs when they use these substances. The effects of Spice products have been reported to last around six hours.

There have been reports from Germany of users who developed panic attacks resembling psychosis after using Spice products, as well as suffering heart and circulatory problems. The symptoms are reminiscent of a marijuana overdose. One of the hazards lurking in Spice products is the fact that they can contain any amount of synthetic cannabinoids whatsoever. The content or dosage is not indicated on the packet.

Cannabis plants cultivated for use as drugs, on the other hand, are known to contain around 5 to 10% tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Tests on animals have shown that JWH-018 and CP 47,497 have an intoxicating effect that is many times stronger than the THC contained in cannabis. For these reasons, the risk of overdosing on Spice products is significantly greater than with marijuana. In addition, the metabolic products of some synthetic cannabinoids are suspected of being poisonous.

When the active ingredients in Spice products were assessed, several EU member states classified these cannabinoids as drugs. JWH-018 and CP 47,497 are controlled substances in countries including Germany, Austria, Sweden, Estonia and France. The same synthetic cannabinoids are classified as medicines in Finland, and preparations containing them are in the same category as prescription medicines. For this reason, it is illegal to order Spice products over the internet in Finland. It is also illegal to import these preparations into Finland without a prescription. A difficulty where legislation is concerned is that as particular synthetic cannabinoids are classified as either medicines or drugs, new substances come

onto the market. Because of this, on 23 December 2009 Britain passed a law classifying all comparable synthetic cannabinoids as drugs.

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References ►

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2 articles on Spice by Istvan Ujvary, published in the August 7 and 14 issues of the Hungarian weekly *Élet és Tudomány /Life and Science/*.

[DrugScope's](#) position paper on the legality of Spice products

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