

Novel Psychoactive Substances: Key points for GPs

What has happened in the past 10 years?

- There has been the rapid emergence of a range of new psychoactive substances. Initially, many of these were Synthetic Cannabinoid Receptor Agonists (SCRAs) that were being used to produce synthetic cannabis products such as 'Kronic'. Bans on individual chemicals led to new SCRAs that appear to be more toxic than the original SCRAs.

What withdrawal symptoms are seen with SCRAs?

- The symptoms associated with withdrawal from synthetic cannabis are acute and severe. There have been cases of seizures so it is recommended that people presenting with chronic synthetic cannabis use are referred to in-patient detoxification services where their withdrawal can be medically monitored.

How has WA tried to reduce the harm from these drugs?

- With the introduction of the 2015 "psychoactive" clause in the WA Misuse of Drugs Act, which effectively bans the sale, production and supply of any product that has a psychoactive effect (excluding alcohol, tobacco, caffeine and medications as prescribed) there has been a significant decrease in hospital presentations in Western Australia. This suggests that the availability and use of synthetic cannabis in Western Australia has significantly reduced. However, the Australian illicit drugs market is constantly changing and it is likely that new trends will emerge in the near future.

How GPs can help their patients?

- Think of asking about illicit drug use in at-risk patients and provide psycho-education.
- Patients that are identified as engaging in illicit drug use should be provided with the knowledge that there are a range of adulterants that might be in their drug of choice.
- It is important to remember that the person's drug of choice may not be the drug from which they are most at-risk of experiencing harm. Hence, it is important to have conversations about all the different drugs that a person might be using, even if some of it is only occasionally used.
- Consider providing additional harm reduction advice, such as noting the availability of reagent testing kits that can provide some indication of whether the person's drugs are adulterated.