NPS

New psychoactive substances

UNODC
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime

2018

NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES

Marketed as 'legal highs', new psychoactive substances (NPS) are proliferating at an unprecedented rate, posing a significant risk to public health and a challenge to drug policy. Often, little is known about the adverse health effects and social harms of NPS, which pose a considerable challenge for prevention and treatment. Monitoring, information sharing and risk awareness are needed to counter this new drug problem.

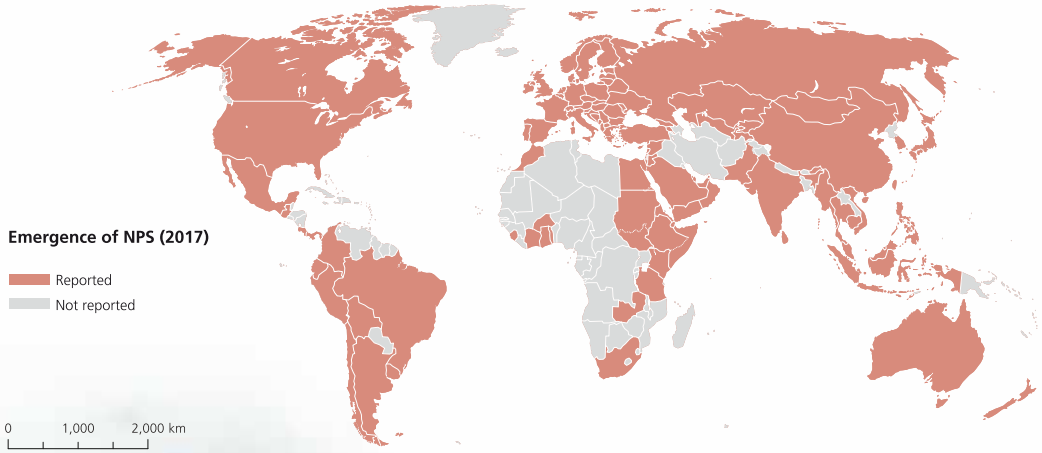
What are NPS?

NPS have been known in the market by terms such as "legal highs", "bath salts" and "research chemicals". To promote clear terminology on this issue, UNODC uses the term "new psychoactive substances (NPS)" which are defined as "substances of abuse, either in a pure form or a preparation, that are not controlled by the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs or the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, but which may pose a public health threat". The term "new" does not necessarily refer to new inventions – several NPS were first synthesized 40 years ago – but to substances that have recently become available on the market.

What are the risks of NPS?

The use of NPS is often linked to health problems. In general, side effects of NPS range from seizures to agitation, aggression, acute psychosis as well as potential development of dependence. NPS users have frequently been hospitalized with severe intoxications. Safety data on toxicity and carcinogenic potential of many NPS are not available or very limited, and information on long-term adverse effects or risks are still largely unknown. Purity and composition of products containing NPS are often not known, which places users at

Global emergence of new psychoactive substances up to December 2017:



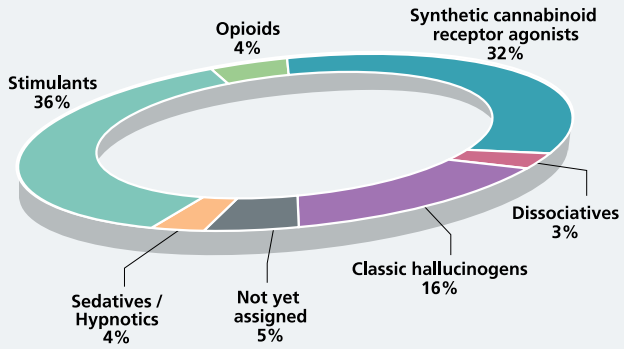
Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Early Warning Advisory on NPS, 2017.

high risk as evidenced by hospital emergency admissions and deaths, sometimes associated with poly-substance use.

How widespread are NPS?

NPS have become a global phenomenon with over 110 countries and territories from all regions of the world having reported one or more NPS. Up to December 2017, more than 800 substances have been reported to the UNODC Early Warning Advisory (EWA) on NPS by Governments, laboratories and partner organisations. NPS available on the market have similar effects as substances under international control such as cannabis, cocaine, heroin, LSD, MDMA (ecstasy) or methamphetamine. Looking at the effects of NPS that have been reported until December 2017 the majority are stimulants, followed by synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists and classic hallucinogens.

New psychoactive substances by effect group, up to December 2017



Source: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Early Warning Advisory on NPS, 2017.

What is the legal situation of NPS?

Since NPS are not controlled under the International Drug Control Conventions, their legal status can differ widely from country to country. Up to 2017, over 60 countries have implemented legal responses to control NPS, with many countries having used or amended existing legislation and others having used innovative legal instruments. Several countries where a large number of different NPS has rapidly emerged, have adopted controls on entire substance groups of NPS using a so-called generic approach, or have introduced analogue legislation that invokes the principal of "chemical similarity" to an already controlled substance to control substances not explicitly mentioned in the legislation. At the international level, up to March 2017, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs decided to place 27 NPS under international control. These control measures have to be implemented into the national legal framework of each country.

How is UNODC assisting Governments in this area?

To assist Member States in the identification and reporting of NPS, UNODC established the Early Warning Advisory (EWA) on NPS, which serves as a monitoring tool and knowledge hub - offering information on NPS trends, harms, national legislative responses as well as technical information - to policy-makers, laboratories and law enforcement officers. To enhance the forensic capacity of national drug laboratories, UNODC prepared a number of manuals on the identification and analysis of fentanyl and its analogues, piperazines, synthetic cannabinoids and synthetic cathinones. Selected chemical reference standards are also distributed to forensic laboratories as part of the UNODC International Quality Assurance Program. In addition, training and awareness raising workshops for laboratories and law enforcement are provided.

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The UNODC Early Warning Advisory on NPS

Under the umbrella of its Global Synthetics Monitoring: Analyses, Reporting and Trends (SMART) Programme and pursuant to resolutions of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs, UNODC developed the first international monitoring system on *new psychoactive substances* (NPS). The UNODC Early Warning Advisory (EWA) on NPS provides access to basic information on NPS for the public. Registered users can access specific information on NPS, include trend data, chemical details on individual substances, supporting documentation on laboratory analysis and legislative responses. In response to CND Resolution 60/4, the system has been enhanced to incorporate toxicological data, in order to provide information on the adverse health consequences of the use of new psychoactive substances.

To access the UNODC EWA on NPS, visit: www.unodc.org/NPS

The Global SMART Programme is managed by the Laboratory and Scientific Section of the Research and Trend Analysis Branch. Information on the Global SMART Programme can be found via the internet at www.unodc.org or by contacting UNODC at the Vienna International Centre, PO Box 500, 1400 Vienna, Austria.
Please contact the Global SMART Programme at unodc-globalsmart@unodc.org.

UNODC would like to acknowledge the Governments of Australia, Canada, China, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, United Kingdom and United States for their financial support to the Global SMART Programme. Further UNODC would like to thank the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, the International Narcotics Control Board, the World Customs Organization as well as many member states around the world for making available information on NPS to the EWA.

Photos: University Medical Center Freiburg, Germany; Central Narcotics Bureau, Singapore; UNODC; Shutterstock.
Please note that the products (pills, cover and p.2; bath salt, cover) shown in the photos are simulated.