



20 SKUNK

INFORMATION FOR DRUG WORKERS FROM ISDD

What is skunk?

Skunk is the generic name often used by the press and police to describe a potent form of the cannabis plant. In fact skunk is only one of 100 or so varieties of cannabis plant which have high levels of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).

THC is regarded as cannabis' main active ingredient. There are however some 40 different possible active ingredients in cannabis in addition to THC, including dronabinol, which can now be prescribed by doctors to alleviate nausea caused by chemotherapy. Until comparatively recently it was unknown how THC worked. However it is now believed that it interacts with a natural neurotransmitter called Anandamide ('ananda' meaning 'bliss' in sanskrit).

Skunk and other similar varieties are characterised by being grown indoors, either under grow lights or in greenhouse conditions using 'hydroponic' techniques (ie, growing plants in nutrient-rich liquids rather than in soil).

All of them can be 'home grown' with the right equipment or in the case of some strains such as 'Early Girl', they can be grown without equipment on a window sill or balcony. The more intensive the cultivation and nurture the higher the THC content which can often be seen on the buds as crystal or liquid.

The new strains of high THC plants include skunk, 'super-skunk', 'Northern Lights', 'Early Girl', and 'Jack Herer' a cross-bred plant created in 1993 (the details of which, according to growers, are as closely guarded a secret as the Coca Cola recipe). Northern Lights (grown from Indica stock, the basis for cannabis resin) can produce 125 grams of flowering bud per plant with a THC content of around 20 per cent.

'Traditional' herbal cannabis ranges from between two and four per cent THC content. The more potent varieties average between 10 and 14 per cent with the trend being towards even higher levels of THC.

The original skunk was a cross between Indica and Sativa cannabis stock, with the fast-growing Indica as the main ingredient. It was generally believed among regular users and growers that Sativa produced a 'high' (sharper and heightened perception) while Indica produced a 'stoned' effect (just about the opposite).

The original hybrids, including skunk itself, are believed to have originated in the USA. The name skunk itself points to a USA connection (being so-called because of the pungent odour it emits while growing). They have since been refined and cross-bred into a range of different varieties by Dutch growers.

Skunk and the other varieties are now being grown in significant quantities in the Netherlands and Britain. British growers now boast that they are ahead of the Dutch in techniques and quality. They also claim that seed being produced here makes the British market self-sufficient.

Why has skunk become so popular?

● Cannabis resin has been adulterated for years with everything from boot polish to ketamine. But skunk buds are easy to identify and difficult to fake. The herbal dust which is often passed off as skunk can be adulterated by other herbal matter but most regular users can tell the difference by smell and sight.

● It can be home grown from legally obtainable seeds.

● It is powerful and can substitute, for some users, for 'E's or LSD. Users argue that skunk is a natural and safer product.

What are the effects of skunk?

Because of the strength of some of these varieties, many report the onset of effects as being quicker. Certainly there is strong evidence to suggest heightened hallucinogenic effects especially among people who had at some time previously (although not at the same time) experienced LSD. This group of users may be more willing to 'let go' into the effects of cannabis because they have already experienced strong drug effects under LSD. Consequently, the effects of higher dose THC may be more marked.

The main effects are the same as any cannabis although clearly they may be magnified depending on the amount consumed and the individual. But explaining the effects of cannabis is notoriously difficult as they vary so dramatically from one person to another, and are often dependent on mood, company, music, place, the interaction of other substances both legal and illegal and a variable dose.

Skunk's strength and speed can sometimes catch out inexperienced users. Many report that the 'stoned' effect can come on rapidly and be disabling. The results can be quite dramatic, including anxiety attacks and projectile vomiting.

Some of the more common effects include:

- elation
- profound relaxation
- alteration of time and perception
- transient hallucinations, rarely in the same league as LSD
- uncontrollable laughing, increased sociability and talkativeness
- nervousness, anxiety and mild paranoia
- the 'munchies' – a strong desire to eat and continue eating.

Skunk, like most forms of cannabis, is a Class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act. Indoor growing systems may be detectable by police helicopters using thermal imaging equipment, while high intensity lights cause unusually large electricity bills. Anyone using a hydroponic system, or growing more than a handful of plants, is likely to be charged with intent to supply, as well as production and possession. If convicted, even small-scale growers commonly face one to two years' imprisonment, while commercial growers may face longer sentences.