

What is it?

Catha edulis, commonly known as qat or qaadka in Somalia or chat in Ethiopia, but now referred to consistently in the literature as khat, is a green leafy plant cultivated throughout eastern Africa and the Arabian peninsula. Khat contains two known pharmacologically active substances, cathinone (aminopropiophenone) and cathine (norpseudoephedrine).

Cathinone is the main active ingredient. Its concentration in the fresh leaves ranges from 0.3 to 2.1 per cent depending on the origin and variety of the plant. Cathine concentrations range from 0.7 to 2.7 per cent. The active ingredients start to deteriorate two days after the plant has been harvested, meaning it must be consumed fresh.

How is it used? Who uses it?

Khat has been chewed or drunk as a tea in the Muslim cultures of Somalia and Yemen for centuries. It was mentioned in an Arab manuscript in 1333. In modern times, so important is khat as a commodity that its daily export to Aden lay behind the founding of the Ethiopian Airlines.

Somali refugees seeking asylum in Britain because of the civil war in their country are the main group associated with khat in the British press. In the UK it is also used to some extent by groups from Ethiopia and the Arabian peninsula. There is little evidence to suggest khat is being used in the UK except in these communities.

What are the effects?

Khat is predominantly stimulant in effect. A typical khat chewing session is said to be the equivalent of ingesting a moderate 5mg dose of amphetamine sulphate. Following mild euphoria and talkativeness, users have often reported calming effects. In cultures where its use is indigenous, khat has traditionally been used socially, much like coffee in western culture. In some countries, khat is considered a rival to coffee.

Medical use of khat dates back to antiquity, when Alexander the Great used it to treat his soldiers for an unknown "epidemic disease". In the Harar region of Ethiopia, Khat is widely believed to effect 501 different kinds of cures; these equal the numerical value of its Arabic name: ga-a-t (400+100+1).

Can khat use cause problems?

Because it is chewed, khat affects the oral cavity and the digestive tract. Inflammation of the mouth and other parts of the oral cavity with secondary infections is common in khat users. There is also evidence that excessive use of khat can lead to other health problems such as heart disease and loss of sex drive in men. Of particular concern is the risk of oral

cancer, reportedly prevalent among khat chewers in Yemen.

Prolonged and excessive use can bring on psychological problems such as depression, anxiety and irritation, sometimes leading to psychosis. It is becoming apparent (especially in London) that khat use is often overlooked by mental health workers.

Khat plants are grown using a variety of fertilisers and chemicals recently introduced to African farmers, who are not experienced in their use, raising the risk of chemical poisoning among chewers.

Many Somalis (and people from other khat using cultures) do not acknowledge the problems that have been identified with khat. This may be related to the fact that in their home countries most users chew on a social or moderate basis. In the UK, some have escalated their consumption to help them cope with their changed circumstances and the frustrations of life as a refugee.

Is it legal?

The khat plant itself is not controlled under the international UN drug treaties or under UK domestic law. The international community has considered controlling the plant from time to time. In 1983 the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs decided against bringing khat under international controls, concluding that it was for individual governments to assess the situation in their own countries and take such action as they saw fit.

In the UK the decision to control drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act is based on advice from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD). The criterion used by the ACMD is whether the drug is having or appears capable of having "harmful effects sufficient to constitute a social problem". At the Government's request, in 1988 the ACMD considered khat. It concluded that khat misuse did not present evidence of a problem justifying control under the Misuse of Drugs Act. This remains the position.

Cathinone and cathine, khat's active ingredients, are controlled under the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances. The UK is a party to this convention and both substances were controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act in 1987. Cathinone and cathine are class C drugs (the category with the lowest penalties). Cathinone may not be lawfully possessed, supplied, etc, except under a licence for research or "other special purposes" though cathine may be prescribed.

The fact that these drugs are controlled does not mean that khat leaves are illegal. However, the courts may consider them illegal if they have in some way been prepared or formed into a product. Since the leaves are normally chewed fresh the law is unlikely to apply but so far there have been no test cases.