

Skunk

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WHAT IS IT?

Skunk is one variety of herbal cannabis – the green/brownish preparation made from drying and chopping the leafy and flowering parts of the plant. Some skunk is imported from Jamaica, but increasingly skunk is home grown in the UK. Skunk has become a generic name for all herbal cannabis and for all potent cannabis, but neither is accurate. Skunk is just one variety among hundreds of different strains of varying potency which can be grown from seeds. Currently between a third and half of all herbal cannabis is home grown.

BACKGROUND

Skunk was developed in the USA in the 1970s. Users were dissatisfied with the decreasing quality of cannabis – a consequence of its increasing popularity. Also the US government had started a policy of spraying pesticide over the main crops in Mexico. So the users in the States decided they would grow their own. They started experimenting with cross-pollinating different strains and were growing plants up to 8 feet tall outdoors. But these could be easily spotted from the air – so they developed not only a dwarf plant that could be grown indoors but found ways of growing cuttings of female cannabis plants hydroponically – just using water, nutrients and lights but no soil.

This spawned an international industry and in Europe it took root in Holland where growers became increasingly sophisticated in their methods. Inevitably this spread to the UK where most people grow their own for personal use or to distribute to friends although large-scale commercial growing for profit is on the increase.

HOW STRONG IS IT?

The strength of cannabis is measured by the percentage of THC it contains. THC is the main active ingredient of cannabis, the chemical that creates the high.

There have been many claims that cannabis is now much stronger than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. This is largely based on evidence from the USA using government-obtained cannabis with a relatively low THC content. No studies were conducted to compare across the different types of cannabis then available. But in the USA, UK and elsewhere, stronger forms of cannabis have always been available.

In 1998, the House of Lords in its report about the medicinal potential of cannabis stated that the Home Office Forensic Science Service did not support the view that THC content of cannabis in the UK had increased dramatically. This was confirmed in a recent European

study. Despite the greater availability of stronger cannabis, the average strength of THC in UK cannabis in recent years, has remained fairly constant at around 6–8% THC.

WHAT CAN WE MAKE OF ALL THIS?

- Certainly it is the case that stronger cannabis is now more widely available than before, and that more young people use cannabis than did in earlier decades, but it is unclear what this means from a public health perspective.
- Trying to study the link between cannabis and mental health is far more complex than media reporting would have us believe. We have always known that there was a link between cannabis and mental health problems. There are studies which suggest that regular cannabis smokers may increase their chance of developing a psychosis. But the jury is still out on whether or not cannabis can precipitate conditions such as schizophrenia. Research from the UK and Australia shows that the steady increase in the use of cannabis over the past decade has not been matched by increases in diagnosis of schizophrenia in the general population.
- We have no idea what comprises an increased risk through increased potency. Is 10%, twice as dangerous as 5%? And dangerous to whom and in what circumstances?
- Just because there is greater availability of strong cannabis doesn't mean more problems because many users don't like the experience of being totally stoned. They might put less cannabis in the joint, stub it out sooner, puff less or hold it in the lungs for less time. Most people who drink alcohol want to experience the gentle relaxation that comes with a few glasses of wine or a couple of pints. They don't want to get blind drunk. If cannabis is like alcohol then it is the total quantity consumed over a period that relates to the degree of harm rather than the strength of a particular drink at a particular time.
- There have been suggestions that cannabis penalties should be linked to potency. But this presents a major problem. Unlike alcohol or many other drugs, establishing an accurate value for the THC content of a given sample is very difficult.

The European cannabis potency report can be downloaded from www.emcdda.eu.int

factsheet