

THE KETAMINE ZONE



Ketamine is on the up again, tranquillisers are replacing low grade heroin, potent ecstasy pills are back and the artificial division between legal and illegal drugs is crumbling. **Max Daly** and **Peter Simonson** take a look at the results of this year's UK-wide drug trends survey.

Ketamine, the powerful hallucinogenic anaesthetic, has been the biggest riser in the UK drug market in the last year, according to *Druglink Street Drug Trends 2011*.

Feedback from the investigative survey, carried out among frontline drug services, police forces, drug action teams and user groups in 20 town and cities across the UK, has revealed that the use of ketamine had increased in 15 of the 20 areas since 2010.

The findings, which follow a significant upturn in the use of ketamine at Glastonbury Festival this year (*Druglink July-August 2011*), further cement the fact that the drug has been steadily on the rise in Britain since its position was first established as a very niche substance in the clubbing and free party scenes in the early 2000s.

Ketamine, high doses of which can shift users into an intense, out of body state of dissociation, disorientation and hallucination known as a 'k-hole', is either snorted as a powder, mixed with water as a drink or injected.

Evidence suggests that the drug is

being used in an expanding number of settings by a widening demographic. Experts questioned have seen a marked increase in the numbers of young people using ketamine in contexts such as pubs, clubs, house parties, homes and parks. Respondents said that more young people are taking ketamine on a daily basis, with one interviewee likening the regular use of the drug to daily patterns normally associated with cannabis.

As a result, a growing number of heavy consumers of the drug – from teenagers to more seasoned middle-aged users – have developed serious problems such as addiction, impaired mental health, physical injuries while intoxicated and bladder damage (see 'K.O.' feature on p10).

The survey also found that as well as spreading geographically, especially from urban to rural areas, ketamine use has moved onto the heroin and crack scene – with reports of people injecting the substance, partly it appears in response to the low quality of heroin being sold on the streets. Several experts reported that ketamine was being used by some

ONE SERVICE MANAGER IN NORTH EAST SAID THE DEMAND FOR BENZOS IS SO HIGH THAT THE FLATS ON SOME ESTATES WHERE PEOPLE BUY ILLEGALLY IMPORTED TOBACCO AND ALCOHOL HAVE NOW TURNED INTO “KNOCK-OFF BENZO HOUSES”



people in the same way heroin was used in the 1980s – to blot out trauma and social exclusion.

As with the former legal high drug mephedrone, which mimicked ecstasy and cocaine, ketamine now has its legal doppelgänger – in the form of methoxetamine (MXE). The drug is sometimes advertised online as a “bladder-friendly” ketamine substitute, has similar effects to its illegal counterpart and according to one expert has “an expanding fan-base”. Several parts of the country reported increases in the use of MXE.

Bristol and the surrounding rural areas was one of the first parts of Britain to witness significant pockets of ketamine use, amid its squat, free party and student scenes, in the 2000s. But use of the drug continues to grow. “Ketamine is part of Bristol’s recent history,” said Steve Jackson, a manager at the Bristol Drugs Project. “But in the last year we have seen more people using the drug heavily. We are getting more experience of working with users reporting compulsive or addictive usage

of ketamine, with people using large amounts on a daily basis, some injecting and reporting withdrawal symptoms.”

Jackson added that hospitals are reporting increasing numbers of (severe) cases of bladder damage and that local services are developing detox regimes to use with ketamine users. He said: “For some people suffering from severe bladder pains because of their use of ketamine, the only way they have found they can numb the pain is by using more ketamine.”

The survey found a growing ketamine scene among the younger population in the extreme south west of the country. Bruce Barnard, a drug worker at the Freshfield Service in Penzance, said: “In Cornwall we are now seeing higher use by young people, who are traditionally reluctant to engage in treatment with compulsive use problems. Ketamine can be seen at most music events, with people ‘pigging it’ (snorting large amounts) and collapsing at the side of dance floors. As well as concerns about compulsive use, we have had a number of women report to us with concerns

over their vulnerability whilst on ketamine.”

Drug services are having to adapt treatment approaches to accommodate the problem. Neil Brooks, Team Leader at Chill Out, a Nottingham Healthcare Trust service that works with non-injecting drug users said: “Nottingham is a city which has seen more of what can be described as ‘hard-core’ ketamine use in the last year. Our services find these clients difficult to deal with as they need longer periods of treatment, as they often have health issues related to their ketamine use, such as urinary tract and mental health problems. One client needed over a year in our service.”

Until this year ketamine had been slow to move out of the gay clubbing scene in Liverpool, where the drug is known in some circles as ‘gay man’s smack’. Respondents say its use is now spreading to mainstream clubs. Senior drugs researcher Dr Russell Newcombe said: “It’s got a reputation as a drug which can make you unable to handle yourself in public, though its effects vary enormously according to the dose

DELHI DIAZEPAM

Raj, a 34-year-old Londoner, makes £500 a week from selling illicit benzodiazepine pills. How does he get hold of them and why did he get involved? Interview by Peter Simonson.

Raj has a wife and two children and lives in a decent part of north London. He uses heroin and benzos occasionally. Before being involved in the drugs trade he worked in IT. He started using heroin when he was 17 and soon became a runner for a local north London dealer.

He heard through the Indian community that a lot of money could be made importing and selling benzos with little trouble from the authorities. The only drug conviction he has is for heroin possession a decade ago. He says he knows of loads of people who import benzos into the UK in the same way that he does.

"I order them from an uncle who is a chemist in India. He orders them from a pharmaceutical company. I get 2,000 pills shipped over with an import license then delivered to the door via DHL every month. The packages are accompanied by legitimate documents and prescriptions.

"I sell 20 pills for £20, sometimes 25 for £20. The pharmaceutical company sells 2000 pills for the equivalent of £20, so although I pay for shipment and other extras, there is a good profit for me although I sell the pills for so little.

"My main customers are heroin users, but I also sell them to normal people who can't get anti-anxiety scripts from their GP. I sell some benzos, like Midazolam, Clonazepam and Xanax, for £3 as they are much stronger."



WE ARE GETTING A LOT OF COMPULSIVE, ADDICTIVE USAGE OF KETAMINE, WITH PEOPLE USING LARGE AMOUNTS ON A DAILY BASIS, SOME INJECTING AND REPORTING WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS

taken – sniffing quite small doses can give a mildly trippy coked-up buzz, while injecting large doses is about as hallucinogenic as anything ever gets. People are, as the hippies put it, 'gone'." Its widening appeal to a larger group of clubbers was first highlighted in Druglink Street Drug Trends 2005. Then, ketamine had surfaced as a rising substance within the local drug scenes of eight of the 20 town and cities questioned. It was classified as a Class C drug in 2006. The British Crime Survey has recorded a rise in ketamine use in England and Wales since the drug was added to the questionnaire in its 2007 report.

Ketamine's supply into the UK largely

comes via internet orders from regulated and unregulated pharmaceutical agents in India and China. The drug was originally imported into the UK in liquid form inside rosewater bottles. And was easily available in street markets and pharmacies. But since enforcement agencies in both the UK and India clamped down when the drug became illegal in Britain 2006, the trade moved off the streets and onto the web.

The price of a gram of ketamine has remained relatively unchanged from last year, at £21 a gram compared to £20 a gram in 2010. Average prices per gram ranged from £8 in one part of the UK to £40 in London.

The other big change in Britain's drug market over the last 12 months has a familiar ring to it. Our 2008 survey revealed rapidly rising levels of tranquilliser use across the country. And this year, tranquillisers, most commonly the benzodiazepine, diazepam, have again increased to new levels. Diazepam, along with similar substances such as Tramadol and phenazepam, reported a rise in use in the last year in 16 of the 20 areas investigated.

The trend is almost certainly a result of the heroin drought that affected much of the country from around November 2010. The drought drove the purity of the drug at street level down to record lows of 13 per cent (see Druglink March-April 2011) for several months in some areas. One drug service said that one of its heroin users had taken £150 worth of the drug the night before a drug test, which later came up as negative. The rise in tranquilliser use has been accompanied by a fall in the use of heroin, mainly intravenously, in several of the areas questioned.

Diazepam and other tranquillisers have for decades been used in the illicit drug market as a cheap alternative to heroin and methadone. But the survey found services are dealing with increasing numbers of people for whom tranquillisers are their primary drug of addiction. In addition to the growing numbers of opiate users taking up benzos, experts reported an increase in people aged under 30 using the pills with alcohol at home, in pubs or at music festivals.

Most areas reported increases in a range of legal, black market and illegal substances – such as alcohol, speed, crack, Subutex, methadone and ketamine – by primary heroin users.

Some areas report that during the heroin drought users were using the cold water extraction method to remove the paracetamol from prescription codeine pills in order to get an opiate high. One



area in south west England reported that toxicology tests had shown some heroin was being cut with speed and Subutex. Other areas told of heroin users taking up the injecting of speed and ketamine to compensate for their lack of a powerful opiate high. One service manager in north east said the demand for benzos is so high that the flats on some estates where people buy illegally imported tobacco and alcohol have now turned into “knock-off benzo houses”.

Meanwhile, after an absence of more than a decade, high MDMA-content ecstasy pills have returned to ten of the 20 towns and cities. Pills are selling in some areas up to £15 each, pushing the average price of ecstasy up to £4 from last year’s average price of £2.65. The increase in potency of pills has reduced the amount of pills people are taking per session, with one or two pills sufficing instead of doses of five or more.

The use of the often illegally sold, injectable tanning aid Melanotan has spread from the north east and Wales to London, Portsmouth, Nottingham and Blackpool. Another substance on the rise after a decade of decline are amphetamines. Nine of the 20 towns and cities reported that the number of people injecting speed has risen.

The line between the illegal and the legal market in psychoactive drugs is becoming more blurred than ever before, with many ‘legal’ brands containing banned substances such as mephedrone. For drug users it is increasingly hard to know whether the white powder they are buying is against the law or indeed, how many different substances have been combined to make it.

The internet drug trade continues to shape-change and provide new products containing a chaotic medley of illegal and legal compounds. Alongside the recent popularity of MXE mentioned above, the potent legal high Black Mamba, which mimics the effects of

AVERAGE STREET DRUG PRICES 2011

(Druglink Street Drug Trends 2011)

Prices (£)	2011	2010
Herbal cannabis (standard) per qtr ounce:	30	30
Herbal cannabis (skunk) per qtr ounce:	46	50
Resin cannabis per qtr ounce:	26	26
Heroin per bag:	0.15g for 10	0.2g for 10
Cocaine per gram:	50	42
Crack per rock:	0.15g for 10	0.2g for 10
Ecstasy per pill:	4	2.65
MDMA powder/crystal per gram:	35	32
Amphetamine per gram:	10	9
Ketamine per gram:	21	20
Diazepam per 10mg pill:	1	1
Mephedrone per gram:	17	19

cannabis, has emerged as an alternative to the banned Spice and experts in Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool all noted its growth.

“Black Mamba is probably the most popular legal high in Liverpool at present,” said Russell Newcombe. “The number of legal highs being sold by head shops and websites has hugely increased, and though little hard data is available, my impression is that, with the exception of cannabis, many legal highs – for instance, salvia, nitrous oxide, khat and methoxetamine – are as popular if not more popular than the standard controlled drugs.”

