

SYNTHETIC CANNABINOIDS: PREVALENCE, PATTERNS OF USE, MOTIVES, AND EFFECTS IN TREATMENT SEEKING CANNABIS USERS

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Introduction / Issues: Synthetic cannabinoids are part of a class of emerging psychoactive substances creating challenges for health care and policy makers. The laboratory-made chemical compounds mimic the effects of cannabis when ingested and share neurobiological similarities with plant-based cannabinoids. Use is more common among cannabis users.

Method / Approach: An electronic search of English literature between 2004 and January 2015 was conducted using Medline. 'Synthetic cannabinoids' (main phrase) was the search term, with animal studies rejected. This was supplemented by citations referenced in the sourced literature. 175 studies were identified.

Key Findings: The review explores the literature surrounding synthetic cannabinoids, and given the association between these substances and cannabis, compares known neurobiology, effects and harms, prevalence and availability, motivations for use and regulatory controls. Synthetic cannabinoids possess greater potential for harm however consumers appear attracted to their recreational and therapeutic value. Their perceived non-detectability also plays a role in their appeal.

Discussions and Conclusions: Ongoing monitoring of the prevalence and patterns of synthetic cannabinoid use among target populations such as heavy or frequent cannabis users or the mining workforce is warranted. Regulatory changes appear to have had some effect on prevalence; however this picture is likely to be impacted by other factors.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Synthetic cannabinoids continue to be used in Australia in some populations. Given the limited understanding of the effects of these drugs on humans, ongoing monitoring should be considered.

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