

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

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Stimulant Drug Khat Increasingly Available in the U.S.; Used Primarily by East African and Middle Eastern Immigrants

The National Drug Intelligence Center (NDIC) recently reported that the availability of khat is increasing in the U.S. While its use will probably remain limited to certain ethnic populations, NDIC concludes that "khat will remain a growing concern among law enforcement agencies in the United States because of its increasing availability" (NDIC, May 2003, p. 4). This CESAR FAX updates a previous fax on this topic published more than a decade ago (see CESAR FAX, Volume 1, Issue 45).

What is khat? Khat (*Catha edulis*) is a flowering evergreen shrub that is native to Africa and the Arabian Peninsula. Fresh khat leaves contain the stimulant cathinone. The leaves deteriorate after 48 hours at which time cathinone is converted to cathine, a stimulant that is much less potent than cathinone.

What are the street names for khat? Khat is also known as Abyssinian tea, African salad, bushman's tea, chat, gat, kat, miraa (in Kenya), oat, qat (in Yemen), quat, tohai, and tschat (in Ethiopia).

What does khat look like? Fresh khat leaves are glossy and crimson-brown in color. Deteriorated khat leaves are leathery and yellow-green in color.

How is khat used? Fresh khat is usually chewed and/or kept in the cheek like chewing tobacco. Dried khat can be smoked, brewed in tea, or sprinkled on food.

What are the effects of khat? Khat use results in mild euphoria, excitement, alertness, talkativeness, dilated pupils, suppressed appetite, and increased blood pressure and heart rate. The effects usually last between 90 minutes and three hours, but can last up to 24 hours. Repeated use may cause dependence, manic behavior, paranoia, hallucinations, anorexia, tachycardia, hypertension, and insomnia. Withdrawal symptoms include lethargy and mild depression.

How does khat get into the U.S.? Khat is legal in much of Europe, East Africa, and the Arabian Peninsula. It is primarily smuggled into the U.S. by overnight express mail because of its limited shelf life.

Who uses khat? Khat has a long history of social and cultural use in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Somalia, Ethiopia, and Yemen. Its use in these countries is often compared to the use of tobacco or caffeine in North America. In the U.S., khat use is most prevalent among immigrants from these countries and abuse levels are highest in cities where there are large populations of these immigrants (e.g., Boston, Columbus, Dallas, Detroit, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Nashville, New York, and Washington, DC). The National Drug Intelligence Center reports that although there have been recent reports of use by Caucasian individuals, "the drug likely will not become widely popular due to its limited shelf life and because stimulant abusers commonly seek more intense physiological effects, such as those produced by cocaine and methamphetamine" (p. 4).

Is khat considered an illegal substance in the U.S.? Fresh khat contains cathinone, a Schedule I drug under the Controlled Substances Act. Deteriorated khat contains cathine, a Schedule IV drug.

SOURCES: A complete list of sources is available at www.cesar.umd.edu.

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