

Legal highs – what should parents know?

There's been a lot in the news about so-called legal highs lately, from reports of overdoses to a government proposal to ban the sale of all psychoactive substances. But what are they, and what can you do to help your children stay safe?

What are legal highs?

Legal highs are substances that aren't banned but mimic the effects of illegal drugs. Some are seeds, plants and herbs with psychoactive properties, but often when people refer to legal highs they're talking about synthetic compounds made in labs – known as new or novel psychoactive substances (NPS for short).

The term legal highs may be a bit misleading – police in Strathclyde, for instance, found that 19% actually contained banned substances. And a new government proposal would ban the sale of any psychoactive substance that isn't alcohol, tobacco, caffeine, food or medicine. But it's especially important not to assume that highs billed as legal are safe. Many are very powerful, with dangerous side effects and addictive potential. And because they're so new, little is known about their long term effects.

Top tips for talking about legal highs

In a survey by Adfam and Serve Legal, 50% of young people said they would be open to hearing more about the health risks of legal highs from their parents. If you do decide to have a conversation, here are a few things to consider.

- 1. Find out more.** There's no need to become an expert on legal highs, but you'll probably feel more confident talking about them the more you know. For more information, try organisations like the Angelus Foundation (<http://www.angelusfoundation.org.uk/>) and Talk to Frank (<http://www.talktofrank.com/>).
- 2. Be prepared to listen.** According to a survey by the Angelus Foundation, nearly two thirds of 16-24 year olds have a friend who has tried legal highs – so even if your child has no first-hand experience of these drugs, they may well know something about them. You might try saying you've read an article about legal highs and asking what they've heard.
- 3. Offer specific advice on avoiding drugs and staying safe.** Young people are often warned about the dangers of drugs without getting any specific advice on harm reduction or how to say no. You could explain how dangerous it is to mix alcohol and other substances, for example, or help them think of ways to turn down drugs if they're offered.