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NPS



Overview

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The abbreviation NPS is generally used in France to refer to “Nouveaux produits de synthèse”, or New Psychoactive Substances in English.

They refer to a very heterogeneous range of substances that mimic the effects of different illicit products (ecstasy, amphetamines, cocaine, cannabis, etc.). Their molecular structures are similar, but not quite identical. This specificity allows them, at least in the short term, to circumvent drug legislation; some are classified, others have no clear legal status. Usually purchased on the Internet, NPS are known either by their chemical names or through trade names.

However, it should be noted that the European Union is involved in the Early Warning System on New Psychoactive Substances (EWS). The European definition for NPS covers all substances that are not internationally controlled and whose misuse has been newly identified. According to this definition, which is not the one used here, NPS can therefore be either drugs or plants.

The main NPS present in France are synthetic cannabinoids, close to delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC, the active ingredient of cannabis), phenethylamines, close to either MDMA or LSD, thus covering a wide variety of substances including cathinones, closer to MDMA. There are several other chemical classes of NPS (aminoindanes, indolkylamines, etc.), the use of which is less frequently observed.

Commercial presentations of NPS raise the issue of users' knowledge about the true nature of the content. They cast doubt on the synthetic nature of the products (presentation in herbal form) or use forms that suggest that the compositions and dosages are controlled in advance.

However, there is a great variability in the dosages of NPS, and consequently in the effects experienced and/or undesirable.

Reference :

- Martinez M., Néfau T., Cadet-Taïrou A. [New psychoactive Substances - Ten-year overview of the situation in France](#). Tendances, OFDT, 2018, no. 127, 8 p.

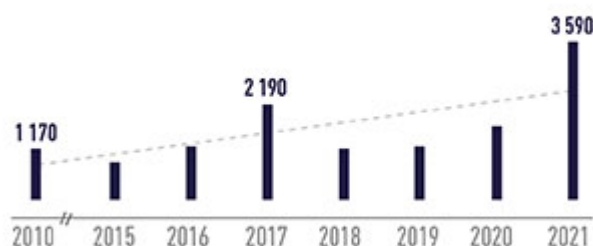


Production/supply

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Most of the NPS identified so far in Europe by the EWS network were mainly produced and then imported from China and, to a lesser extent, India. In the EU, according to the European Monitoring Centre, only Poland and the Netherlands have reported NPS production on their territory.

Number of NPS seizures per year in France



Source: data from the Customs Laboratories Joint Service and the STUPS database, processed by OFDT

Between 2007-2008, the year that molecules considered to be NPS were first identified in France, and 2014, the number of identifications was constantly increasing, with a significant increase from 2011 onwards. In 2015, this number decreased but still remained high, above the level of 2013. During this year, 43 new molecules were identified in France, including 8 for the first time in Europe. The current rate of identifications has since slowed down. A total of 368 new substances that have circulated at least once in France have been identified since the first molecules appeared. In Europe, there have been over 897 new psychoactive substances since 1997.

References :

- Martinez M., Néfau T., Cadet-Taïrou A. [New psychoactive Substances - Ten-year overview of the situation in France](#). Tendances, OFDT, 2018, no. 127, 8 p.
- Detrez V. [Le Point SINTES no. 7](#). Paris, OFDT, 2021, 16 p.

To download the list of new synthetic products identified (classification by family), in France since 2000 (updated on 14.04.2022), please click [here](#)



Use

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At the European level, there are large differences in prevalence between Member States. Thus, the use of NPS in France appears to be more limited than in other countries (Ireland, the United Kingdom and Poland). However, in surveys carried out at national level and on representative samples, these products are not mentioned spontaneously by the respondents (*Santé publique France* Health Barometer or ESCAPAD -the Survey on Health and Use on National Defence and Citizenship Day).

However, widespread media coverage (written, audiovisual and Internet) following the prohibition of mephedrone in April 2010 has helped to fuel a growing interest in these products on the part of very specific sub-groups of users (those close to the gay party scene, “e-psychnauts”, users of the commercial party scene, drug users involved in poly-use or chronic cannabis users).

Use at age 17

In the ESCAPAD 2017 survey, as in 2014, a question was asked to describe NPS use among young people in late adolescence. A total of 3.8% of 17-year-olds reported that they had used a drug-like product. However, only 11.8% of them specified which product it was, mainly a synthetic cannabinoid.

References :

- OFDT. [1999-2019: changes in drug use and supply in France through the experience of the OFDT's TREND scheme. Summary](#). Paris, OFDT, Théma TREND, 2020, 9 p.
- Martinez M., Néfau T., Cadet-Tairou A. [New psychoactive Substances - Ten-year overview of the situation in France](#). Tendances, OFDT, 2018, no. 127, 8 p.
- OFDT. [ESCAPAD, 20 ans d'observation des usages à l'adolescence](#). [ESCAPAD, 20 years of observation of drug use in adolescence.] Paris, OFDT, Théma, 2022, 62 p.
- Spilka S., Le Nézet O., Janssen E., Brissot A., Philippon A., Shah J., Chyderiotis S. [Drug use in 17-year-olds: analysis of the 2017 ESCAPAD survey](#). Tendances, OFDT, 2018, no. 123, 8 p.



Consequences

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At present, very little is known about the long-term risks of the use of these products, i.e. their chronic toxicity or their potential for drug dependence. Studies are needed to make this assessment. The first studies on effects and toxicity in humans started to appear in 2012.

However, health alerts are regularly issued concerning the circulation of molecules whose composition or dosage can generate serious health incidents.

References :

- Detrez V. [Le Point SINTES no. 7](#). Paris, OFDT, 2021, 16 p.
- Martinez M., Gandilhon M. [État des lieux sur le fentanyl et les fentanylloïdes en France](#). [Overview

of fentanyl and fentanyloids in France.] Paris, OFDT, 2021, 10 p.



Perceptions /opinions

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Given their very limited distribution in France, the general population does not have specific opinions on NPS.

Very different behaviours are observed according to the user groups among whom a diffusion of NPS is observed.

Connoisseurs, mainly present on forums, display behaviours that are part of the “psychonautic” trend. That is to say, they see these products as a means of consciously modifying their senses, either for the purpose of introspection or for the simple fact of experiencing these modifications. For these people, the molecules that most attract their interest were created in the 1970s and the proliferation of NPS seems to them to be the consequence of the creation of a market for the greatest number of people, without any link to the movement they claim to belong to.

Amongst the groups in alternative or commercial party spaces, the behaviour adopted is different. The socio-economically established public encountered in clubs positively associate low prices with the purity and potency of the effects. In the alternative party space, user interpret this in the opposite way: the low price suggests a bad product and therefore a ‘scam’. They also seem to be more afraid of the potency of the products.

Users who have already used opiates in the past (patients on substitution treatment, poly-drug users focused on opiates) seem to go through two distinct phases of perception towards substances. The first is marked by ambivalence, between the excitement of the novelty and the fear of significant side effects. The second shows an integration of product-specific usage patterns.

References :

- OFDT. [1999-2019: changes in drug use and supply in France through the experience of the OFDT's TREND scheme. Summary](#). Paris, OFDT, Théma TREND, 2020, 9 p.
- Martinez M., Gandilhon M. [État des lieux sur le fentanyl et les fentanylloïdes en France](#). [Overview of fentanyl and fentanyloids in France.] Paris, OFDT, 2021, 10 p.



Legal framework and recent public policies

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The [order of 27 July 2012](#) represented a major change in the way the classification of new psychoactive products is carried out. Until then, individual classifications were made, molecule by molecule. With this order, for the first time, legislators have used a so-called “generic” approach. A

large proportion of cathinones are thus classified by a single text.

Beyond these measures, the identification of new substances is a technical challenge for France as well as for other European Union Member States. It requires collaboration between laboratories at the national level but also at the European level via the Early Warning System. For the time being, it is through this European network that laboratories share their knowledge, with the identification of a substance by one of them being rapidly disseminated to the partners.

Reference :

- [EWS page on the EMCDDA website](#)

More information in video:

Last update: September 2022