

Why 'skunk' smokers are 18 TIMES more likely to become psychotic than other cannabis users

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Mental illness risk: Smoking skunk is linked to psychosis

Skunk cannabis users are 18 times more likely to develop psychosis than those who smoke milder forms of the drug, doctors have warned.

Skunk can be ten times stronger than other types of the drug and has become the most common variety in recent years.

Researchers from the Institute of Psychiatry in London compared data on almost 200 cannabis users.

More than half were being treated for psychosis, in which hallucinations and delusions leave sufferers unable to tell between real and imagined.

Skunk was the drug of choice for psychosis sufferers, with users 18 times more likely to develop the condition.

Milder forms of cannabis were more popular with those without mental health problems.

Those with psychosis were also twice as likely to have used cannabis for longer and three times more likely to have used it every day, the Royal College of Psychiatrists' annual conference heard yesterday.

Researcher Marta Di Forti compared the dangers of skunk to alcohol, saying: 'It's like when you look at a bottle of vodka and a bottle of wine, the difference between the two - apart from the taste - is the percentage of alcohol in them.'

'One is much stronger or potent than the other and it's exactly the same with cannabis.'

Urging psychiatrists to question their patients more carefully about their drug habits, Dr Di Forti said: 'It would be naive to say that smoking a joint is safe.'

The mental health charity Sane said the study may provide an insight into why 'such a significant proportion' of people with serious mental illness have used cannabis.

FACT FILE

- Named after its pungent smell, skunk has been bred to contain on average two to three times as much of the psychoactive compound THC as other forms of cannabis
- Some strains contain THC levels as high as 35 per cent
- It also contains little or no cannabidiol - a compound that counteracts the effects of THC
- Skunk makes up 80 per cent of cannabis seized in Britain - six years ago it accounted for only 15 per cent of the market
- It is blamed for a 73 per cent rise in adult hospital admissions related to cannabis in a decade
- Most skunk bought in Britain is grown here, with a factory of 200 plants making its owners £30,000 profit in three months

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Spokesman Richard Colwill said: 'Sane has been campaigning for years that cannabis, particularly in its stronger form of skunk, can be dangerous for the significant minority of people vulnerable to mental illness.'

'We have daily evidence that it can trigger frightening psychotic episodes, relapse, and in some cases a lifelong mental condition such as schizophrenia.

'It can also rob developing young minds of their potential and wreck their families' and their own futures.'

Home Secretary Jacqui Smith announced in April that cannabis will be restored to class B status from early next year.

Cannabis was downgraded to class C in 2004, but the widespread use of skunk has prompted a backlash.

Miss Smith said the move would protect the 'future health' of a generation of vulnerable youngsters.

Skunk has been linked to a string of vicious killings. Father-of-three Garry Newlove was murdered by three teenagers high on skunk and beer in Warrington, Cheshire.

And Terry Wilson was stabbed to death in his sleep in Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, by his son Daniel, 28, during a skunk-induced delusion.