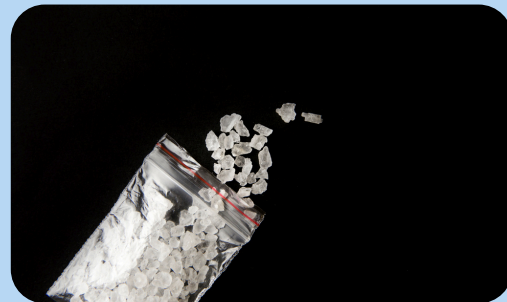
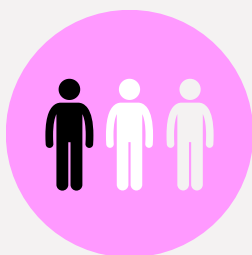


Substances At A Glance: Designer Drugs

Designer drugs are created by modifying existing drugs at a chemical level to create a drug that can have similar effects but avoid being classified as illegal. Most are eventually deemed unsafe and/or illegal.



What are designer drugs? Designer drugs refer to synthetically created products which are usually based on existing drugs to mimic their effects. Examples of designer drugs include synthetic cannabinoids (based on cannabis) and bath salts (based on cathinone found in the khat plant). Other drugs recognized as designer drugs include MDMA (ecstasy), Bromazolam (fake Xanax), Benzylpiperazine (BFP) and Trifluoromethylphenylpiperazine (TFMPP).



Designer drug use among youth: In Canada, the prevalence of designer drug use is hard to accurately measure because new drugs are synthesized from one year to the next. Approximately 9% of students in grades 7-12 reported past 12-month use of illegal drugs including designer drugs in 2024.¹ Meanwhile, 12% of post-secondary students reported past 12-month use of illegal drugs in 2022.²



Why do people use designer drugs? Designer drugs are marketed to appear 'safer' than other drugs, especially the drugs that they are based upon.¹ They can be sold in some stores and online, and often say that they offer a 'legal' high for people. Young people who are in competitive sports may choose designer drugs because some of these drugs may not be detected in drug tests.³ Others may choose to use designer drugs for things like losing weight or helping with sleep.⁶



What are the effects of designer drugs? Most designer drugs mimic the effects of stimulants like cocaine or methamphetamine, including increased energy, euphoria, increased sex drive, alertness and excitement. Synthetic cannabinoids cause similar effects of cannabis: excitement, hallucinations and euphoria. Designer drugs can also have different effects than their drugs of inspiration, including confusion, aggression, delusions, extreme anxiety/panic attacks and suicidal thoughts. *Additional unknown effects may also occur with designer drugs, since they are not clinically tested or properly regulated.*^{4,5,6}



Designer drugs and the law: Designer drugs often promote themselves as 'legal' ways to get high. However, this idea is often challenged when healthcare researchers and law enforcement are able to test and measure these products for their safety. Bath salts, synthetic cannabinoids, ecstasy, BZP and TFMPP have each been made illegal in Canada, despite their producers originally claiming otherwise. They cannot be produced, possessed, bought/sold or transported anywhere in Canada.



Substances At A Glance: Designer Drugs

Designer drugs claim to be 'safe' highs, however they lack any credible evidence to prove these claims. They can have many unknown side effects, which can be extremely harmful.



What are the risks of designer drug use? Designer drugs can carry serious risks to the human body, owing to the fact they are not tested properly before reaching the market. These risks can include suicidal thoughts, violent outbursts, delusions or psychotic episodes. Possible physical risks range from diarrhea, vomiting, high blood pressure and fever to far more serious, even fatal risks such as multiple organ failure, hyperthermia, seizures and heart attack. Designer drug use can also become addictive. Additional risks may occur from new designer drugs since they are not properly tested or monitored.^{4,5,6}



How can someone reduce the risks of designer drug use? Designer drugs should be avoided or used in smaller amounts than other drugs, since their effects are largely unknown. Avoid mixing designer drugs with other drugs, as this may cause more serious effects. In the case of synthetic cannabinoids, it is recommended that anyone of legal age considering using them should instead consider natural cannabis products to avoid risk of organ failure or seizures. If someone is experiencing chest pains, severe vomiting or psychological distress, they should contact emergency services immediately.



How can I help my kids understand the risks of designer drugs? It's okay to admit that much is unknown about designer drugs when talking about them with your kids. After all, the unknown risks can be serious, especially for young people. Ask questions about what they have seen or heard from their peers about drug use, remind them to always have a sober and safe method of travel, and remain supportive of your child's well-being, whether they choose to avoid or use drugs.



The Good Samaritan Overdose Act: Someone who uses designer drugs may not call emergency medical services in the event of an overdose for fear they could get into legal trouble. The Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act offers some legal protection to anyone seeking emergency support during an overdose, including the person experiencing the overdose and anyone else on the scene. The Act can protect from charges of possession of a controlled substance.⁷

Reference List

1. Government of Canada, 2025. [Canadian Student Alcohol And Drugs Survey, 2023-2024.](#)
2. Government of Canada, 2024. [Canadian Post-Secondary Education Alcohol & Drug Use Survey 2021-2022.](#)
3. American Addiction Centers, 2023. [What Are Designer Drugs?](#)
4. Health Canada, 2023. [Bath Salts.](#)
5. Interior Health, retrieved 2023. [Synthetic Cannabinoids: What Are They?](#)
6. Government of Canada, 2012. [Amending Schedule III to the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act and the Schedule to Part J of the Food and Drug Regulations to include BZP and TFMP](#)
7. Government of Canada, 2017. [About the Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act](#)