

Mental health toll of skunk cannabis: Number of users admitted to hospital after smoking drug soars 50% in three years

- **Campaigners warned young people are damaging their mental health**
- **Skunk on Britain's streets is around five times as potent as traditional weed**

By Jack Doyle

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Growing numbers of cannabis users are needing hospital treatment for 'mental disorders' after smoking super-strength skunk, drugs campaigners warned last night.

In just three years, the number admitted for treatment has increased by 50 per cent - as the chemically enhanced danger drug has flooded the streets.

Last night drugs campaigners warned young people were severely damaging their mental health, and blamed permissive policing, including the use of cautions and spot fines. Mary Brett, a trustee of Cannabis Skunk Sense said: 'This worrying trend was entirely predictable, as a growing proportion of the cannabis on sale in Britain is now extremely potent skunk. 'This rising potency would seem to coincide with the numbers going into hospital, as more children are using this dangerous drug.

'We need an end to the authorities turning a blind eye to cannabis as if it is a harmless substance, as these figures show it clearly is not.'

Skunk sold on Britain's streets is mostly grown in this country and is around five times as potent as traditional weed. Recent years have seen its prevalence surge compared to imported cannabis resin. Figures released by the Department of Health show hospital admissions linked to cannabis use have increased by half in three years.

In 2008-9 some 651 admissions were recorded by the NHS in England relating to a diagnosis of 'mental or behavioural disorder due to use of cannabinoids'. By 2011-12, that figure had risen to more than 1000.

The figures were released to shadow health minister Diane Abbott in response to a question lodged in Parliament. Last night Miss Abbott said: 'These figures are really concerning. 'I think that too often, people are willing to romanticise cannabis. What we're seeing on our streets is often skunk - many times more powerful than the cannabis which today's ageing baby-boomers smoked in college.' 'The government's lack of focus and interest in this issue, and the way they have abolished the National Treatment Agency, means that many of these problems may get even worse.' 'Evidence of the damage to mental health caused by cannabis use - from loss of concentration to paranoia, aggressiveness and outright psychosis - is mounting and cannot be ignored.'

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A 2008 Home Office survey found average concentrations of THC - the active ingredient in cannabis - of 16 per cent. But in some samples the level was much higher - up to 45 per cent. Skunk also contains less of an anti-psychotic ingredient which moderates the harmful effects of THC. Repeated studies have shown the harmful impact on mental health of cannabis use among young people. Research has suggested skunk users under 18 are four times more likely to suffer from schizophrenia in later life, and users under 15 may be ten times more likely than adults to suffer harmful effects. Scientists also found long term use of skunk can lead to 'significant and irreversible' fall in a young person's IQ. Earlier this year, the Mail revealed chief police officers have quietly adopted a new 'softer' policy on illegal drug taking. It means a 'less robust enforcement approach' on possession of drugs such as cannabis, with more offenders receiving spot fines.