New drugs were detected in the European Union last year at the rate of around one per week, according to the EMCDDA–Europol 2011 annual report on new psychoactive substances released today (1). A total of 49 new psychoactive substances were officially notified for the first time in 2011 via the EU early-warning system (EWS) (2). This represents the largest number of substances ever reported in a single year, up from 41 substances reported in 2010 and 24 in 2009.

In 2011, the list of substances registered was dominated by two groups: synthetic cannabinoids (23 substances) and synthetic cathinones (8 substances)(Graph 1) (3). These now represent the two largest drug groups monitored by the EWS and, together, make up around two-thirds of the new drugs reported last year. All of the new compounds reported in 2011 were synthetic.

‘New drugs have become a global phenomenon which is developing at an unprecedented pace’, say the agencies. The improved capacities of national early-warning systems may have also contributed to the rising number of new drugs reported. Some of the newly identified substances were actively sought through test purchases of ‘legal high’ products from the Internet or from specialised shops (see Graph 2).

‘The speed at which new drugs appear on the market challenges established procedures for monitoring, responding to, and controlling the use of new psychoactive substances’, states the report. This in turn has generated greater interest in the phenomenon, as seen through increased national awareness-raising initiatives, new legislative formulations and studies and surveys on the prevalence of use.

Highlighted as significant in 2011 was the increasing number and diversity of synthetic cannabinoids (e.g. found in ‘Spice’-like products), of which five new chemical families were detected. (This brought the total number of synthetic cannabinoids reported since 2008 up to 45, the largest drug group now monitored through the EWS). Responding to health concerns, some countries have adopted ‘generic controls’ on chemical families as well as controls on individual substances (4).

EMCDDA Director Wolfgang Götz says: ‘We now see new drugs marketed in attractive packages on the Internet or sold in nightclubs and on street corners. Whatever the source, the simple fact is that a dangerous game of roulette is being played by those who consume an ever-growing variety of
powders, pills and mixtures, without accurate knowledge of what substances they contain and the potential health risks they may pose'.

Commenting on the EWS, Götz adds: 'We must continue to enhance Europe’s ability to detect and respond quickly and appropriately to these developments. This requires networking and the sharing of information and it requires greater investment in forensic analysis and research'.

In a follow-up section on the synthetic cathinone, mephedrone, the report shows that 26 EU Member States, Norway and Croatia, now control the substance under drug legislation (with the Netherlands expected to follow suit shortly) (5). Also described in the report is the EMCDDA’s monitoring of the online 'legal high' market. The number of online shops offering at least one psychoactive substance or product rose from 314 in January 2011 to 690 in January 2012.

Europol Director Rob Wainwright says: 'The selling of illicit drugs and new psychoactive substances is yet another area where the Internet is abused by organised criminals. We must ensure that law enforcement agencies have the modern operational and legislative tools to combat such cases effectively.'

As announced in its Communication ‘Towards a stronger European response to drugs’, the European Commission will propose stronger EU legislation on new psychoactive substances, taking into account the rapid developments in this field and scientific evidence on the risks posed by these substances (6).

A 2011 Eurobarometer survey of young people showed that on average around 5 % of young respondents (15–24 years) reported having used 'legal highs'. These substances were mainly obtained through friends (54 %), at parties or in clubs (37 %), in specialised shops (33 %) or over the Internet (7 %).

Over 200 substances (including some sold as ‘legal highs’) have been reported by Member States via the EWS since it was created in 1997.

NOTES

2 The EWS provides EU Member States with an information exchange mechanism for reporting on the emergence of new psychoactive substances. It is a key element in the European fast-track
system for assessing and responding to new drugs. The EWS has ‘significant reporting capabilities’ which facilitate the speedy exchange and triangulation of information from existing sources. For more information, see Early warning system page and Monitoring new drugs brochure.

3 For more on these substances see Drug profiles on Synthetic cannabinoids and ‘Spice’ and Synthetic cathinones.

4 For example, Ireland, Italy, Cyprus, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Hungary, Austria and the UK have introduced ‘generic controls’ on synthetic cannabinoid families. See also Drugs in focus No 22.

5 Following an EU decision to control the drug in December 2010


Upcoming – Second international forum on new drugs
The EMCDDA and the United States National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) are joining forces to host the Second international forum on new drugs and emerging psychoactive substances, to be held in Palm Springs (CA) from 8–11 June. See article.