

Khat: A Boon or Bane to Humanity

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Abstract

Khat, an evergreen shrub habitually ingested for its euphoric and stimulatory effects, is grown mainly in eastern Africa and south-western Arabia. Its consumption has, for a long time, been restricted to areas close to the sites of production but, because of recent improvement in efficiency and speed of transportation, khat consumption has spread to far flung lands such as North America, Canada, Australia, United Kingdom and parts of Europe. In regions where it is grown, daily life seems to centre on the crop bringing together farmers, traders, middle men, consumers and transporters. Thousands of dollars change hands daily in market centres where khat business is transacted making it the most lucrative business in these regions. The economies of these regions are therefore driven and sustained by khat trade. Khat contains a psychoactive compound belonging to the phenylpropylamine group of alkaloids called cathinone which has amphetamine-like effects. It causes mild euphoria, wakefulness and a host of other effects on regular consumers. Long distance truck drivers are known to constantly chew khat in order to stay awake. Some chewers, however, derive satisfaction in the ability of khat to promote work endurance while others do it for leisure. Consumers generally prefer young leaves and shoots because they contain a more potent active ingredient cathinone which decays within 48 h to a less potent form called cathine. Despite these positive attributes of khat, it poses serious health risks to consumers arising from the effects of its active ingredient, cathinone on various organ systems. A number of studies have shown that cathinone, has serious effects on cardiovascular, oral and digestive, and urogenital systems. Some of these effects are discussed in details in this chapter.