

## Khat

### Introduction

Khat is an East African shrub (*Catha Edulis*) that can grow to a height of 20 metres and is often grown alongside coffee in the highlands of Kenya, Ethiopia and Yemen.

The soft stems, bark and leaves (various shades of red, purple and green) of the plant contain the active ingredients, cathinone, cathine, cathidine, norpseudoephedrine and edulin. The cathinone bio-degrades easily rendering it practically useless a couple of days after harvest. Because of this, Khat is flown into the UK at least five days a week. According to a 2005 report by the Home Office, some 5-7 tons a day comes into the UK, but much of it is then sent on to the US.

Khat is a stimulant which acts on neurotransmitters in the brain and brain stem in a similar fashion to amphetamine. The drug is used by chewing or 'stored' in the cheeks and orally absorbed into the blood thru the vessels in the mouth. This provides a stimulant effect with a euphoric high accompanied by a sensation down the spine and through the body. It is perhaps for this reason that Khat is wrongly termed a narcotic, which it is not (*narcos* is Greek for sleep.)

In the UK, Khat is usually sold in greengrocers or market stalls, Halal butchers, cheap shop fronts or domestic dwellings set up for this purpose. The latter is the case in areas where there is a significant Somali or Yemeni population (London, Sheffield, Cardiff, Birmingham, etc.). It is sold in bundles coasting from £3 to £5. An 'average' user may chew one or two bundles per session. Khat use is a heavily social activity, with teas and resting cushions and disposal bowls typically provided.

Khat is also known as Qat, Qaat, Gaat and Miraa.

### Pharmacology

While cathinone and cathine are the primary active ingredients in Khat, the plant also contains some 40 other alkaloids, glycosides, tannins and terpenoids. When stored, the leaves quickly lose their effectiveness, becoming inactive after about 36 hours.

The action of enzymes in the saliva releases cathinone and cathine from the chewed leaves. It is thought that cathinone causes dopamine release, in addition to the release of neurotransmitters at the serotonergic synapses and peripheral noradrenergic sites. Khat's mode of action is therefore similar to that of amphetamine, to which its primary active ingredients are related. However, Khat generates a much less intensive stimulant experience, linked to its mode of administration; although chewing is an effective means of releasing the psychoactive chemicals, it is a slow process and the onset is very gradual. This militates against dependence, which tends to be linked to quick-acting and "rush" type experiences.

### History

The first record of Khat by Europeans came in 1775, when botanists noted its use in Yemen. The English traveller and Orientalist Richard Burton noted its presence in 1856, and was

struck by the fact that Khat's use as a mild stimulant was so deeply embedded in the social life of the region, and yet practically unknown elsewhere. Large proportions of the populations of Kenya, Yemen and Ethiopia use the substance; in the latter two countries, it is estimated that 50% or more citizens do so. In recent decades markets have spread out across the globe, the plant and its consumption following the Somali diaspora. Somalia was riven by civil wars and fragmented into a series of fiefdoms controlled by armed clans, with little or no central state authority. As a result, millions of people became refugees, finding their way both to other African states and to Europe and North America. They brought their social customs with them, including the chewing of khat. A substantial minority of people of Yemeni, Ethiopian, Kenyan and Somali origin use khat, many of them on a regular daily basis.

The advent of cheap air travel has provided the technological basis for supplying the markets of the diaspora. A large export trade brings khat from its African growing-regions, much of it passing through those ancient centres of the psychoactive drug trade, Amsterdam and London. A 2005 Home Office report estimated that 5 to 7 tons of khat enter the UK daily, with much of it onward-bound to the US, where the drug's criminalisation has pushed up prices dramatically: in the UK, khat's street price is about £16, in the US some \$400.

### Use and culture

In its African homeland, khat's pattern of consumption has always been a deeply social one, integrated into the rhythms and practices of the culture of daily life, work and leisure. Men—a customary taboo surrounds its use by women—tend to gather in the evening to chew together in groups. It is a practice that brings together people across the lines of ethnicity, class and religion. Bottled water, coffee, cigarettes and chewing gum are on hand to supplement and lubricate the chewing experience. The effect is a mild euphoric stimulant high followed by a period of calm contemplation; during the former, people talk a lot. In the UK, people gather in unlicensed premises known as *mafrish* to consume and gossip—the *mafrish* is the equivalent of the English pub for many expatriate Somalis, a place where drug consumption takes place in a relaxed social setting. Alongside their language and religion, khat also provides a link to their heritage, and a means of shoring up identity in a sometimes-hostile host culture.

In an evening session, people generally use one to three bundles, which are wrapped in banana leaf to retain freshness during transport; each bundle contains 25 to 30 stalks. Although an inexact measure, a bundle weighs around 250 grams and usually costs from £3 to £5. Each user picks leaves and shoots from the stalk, and rolls them into a tight wad, which is kept in the cheek. The leaves are chewed for several hours, the psychoactive ingredients releasing slowly and bringing on a gradual high. The remaining quid is swallowed or discarded, depending on ethnicity and tradition.

There are movements within the Somali community to outlaw khat; often it is women who speak for this position. The gender structure around khat is complex, as women are forbidden to use by tradition, and are denied entry to the *mafrish*. There are however female khat users, though they tend to be very discreet about the fact. Some campaigners claim that chewing khat is a socially deleterious practice, leading to men remaining isolated from the mainstream culture and locked into unemployment, since they prefer to spend their time dreaming and chattering on khat.

## Health

Both the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have recently raised concerns over the alleged harms to health caused by khat; the WHO called for a review of the effects relating to increased blood pressure, tachycardia, insomnia, anorexia and constipation. In the UK, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), tasked with reporting on whether khat should be made a controlled drug under the 1971 Misuse of Drugs Act, recommended against such a move.

Research suggesting links with heart disease and oral cancers is tenuous due to methodological shortcoming and compounding factors. For example, khat use is almost invariably linked with tobacco use, and the possible health effects of each are difficult to unpick from the other. Evidence of ill-effects upon the mental health of users has been gathered, but comes primarily from Somalia; a country that has high levels of mental health problems, which some have suggested are the result of the widespread use of khat. However, a more plausible explanation would be to link these problems to the traumatic effects of years of civil war and the sufferings and hardships that accompanied it.

That said, it is likely that excessive use of khat does have harmful health consequences, though these are yet to be properly researched. As is the case with other drugs, the mode of use, the social setting and the culture governing levels and style of use are key to determining whether khat use becomes, as some believe, a functional equivalent of cocaine or amphetamine or, as others hold, a practice closer to the drinking of strong coffee, which clarifies and stimulates the mind without major side-effects.