

The spread of HHC Semi-Synthetic Cannabis in Malta

Caritas Malta, Fondazzjoni Oasi, the Church Schools Association and the Secretariat for Catholic Education are advocating for the banning of HHC products being sold across the Maltese Islands.

Background

With the legislation for the Responsible Use of Cannabis, we have seen the sprouting of a number of cannabis stores or grow shops around the island marketing and selling low THC (the active ingredient producing the 'high' in cannabis) products, cannabis seeds and cannabis related equipment. Furthermore, low THC products have emerged on online stores and also on the counters, day to day grocery stores. These products are sold and promoted openly even in close proximity to schools and sport centres.

Caritas Malta, Fondazzjoni Oasi, the Church Schools Association and the Secretariat for Catholic Education believe that the proliferation of such products and their marketing has further contributed to the normalisation of cannabis use and allowed easy access of these products to children and youth.

Further to this, in the last months we have observed HHC products also being sold in local stores.

HHC

HHC is a new psychoactive substance which appeared on the drug market in 2021. It is the first semi-synthetic cannabinoid reported in the EU. It is being monitored as an NPS (New Psychoactive Substance) by the European Monitoring Centre for Drug and Drug Addictions.

The products come in various forms and sizes and in very attractive and colourful packets. They are sold as ready rolled blunts, vapes, e-liquid cartridges, HHC oils, sweets, gummies, cookies, marshmallows, and cannabis flowers.

HHC is being sold openly in Malta as a replacement for THC Cannabis products and appears to mimic similar effects. Such products with 30%, 45%, and more HHC are in circulation.

Like THC, a chemical ingredient found in the cannabis plant, HHC is a psychoactive ingredient, which means that when one ingests it, one's state of mind is altered. While HHC is consumed with the expectation of experiencing a 'high' (light-headedness / euphoric state) HHC can potentially lead to experiences such as panic attacks, hallucinations, psychotic attacks, paranoia, confusion, physical pain, severe heart palpitations, seizures, and other distressing symptoms.

Caritas Malta, Fondazzjoni Oasi, the Church Schools Association and the Secretariat for Catholic Education observed that in Malta these products are sold in some grocery stores, on delivery platforms, and on local online websites. In fact, in our local research, we have found HHC containing products being promoted as replacement to THC containing products. Access to children and youth is of particular alarm.

Since the legalisation of Cannabis in Malta, these products have emerged on our market and unfortunately are not illegal as yet.

Austria, Denmark, Belgium, Italy, United Kingdom, France and Switzerland have banned these products, while other countries are in the process of banning it.

We are hopeful that competent authorities will listen to the concern which has also been raised by the Authority of the Responsible Use of Cannabis and take immediate action to ban all HHC products to protect our communities and most especially our children and youth. Caritas Malta, Fondazzjoni Oasi, the Church Schools Association and the Secretariat for Catholic Education also appeal to outlet owners to refrain from selling such products, especially to minors.