Khat
Quat, qat, qaadka, chat, Catha edulis

What is khat?
Khat is a green-leafed shrub that has been chewed for centuries by people who live in the Horn of Africa and Arabian peninsula. It has recently turned up in Europe, including the UK, particularly among emigrants and refugees from countries such as an Somalia, Ethiopia and the Yemen.

Khat is imported to London and sold at greengrocers in areas such as East London. It sells at about 4 a bunch but only remains potent for a few days after picked. It is strongest when the fresh leaves are chewed but can also be made into a tea or chewable paste.

The law
The Khat plant itself is not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act, but the active ingredients, cathinone and cathine, are Class C drugs. Cathininone may not be lawfully possessed or supplied except under a licence for research, though cathine may be prescribed. It is controlled by law in countries such as America, Canada, Norway and Sweden.

History
References to khat use can be found in Arab journals from the 13th century. Physicians prescribed khat to treat depression and lack of energy. The stimulant effects also mean it has been commonly used by peasants who work long hours. In some Muslim countries where alcohol is banned, khat is commonly used in social situations, although khat is often condemned on religious and cultural grounds.

Effects/risks
Khat is a stimulant drug with effects similar to amphetamine. Chewing it makes people feel more alert and talkative and suppresses the appetite, though users describe an ensuing calming effect when used over a few hours. Regular use may lead to insomnia (inability to sleep), anorexia and anxiety. In some cases it may make people feel more irritable and angry and possibly violent. Psychological dependence can result from regular use so that users feel depressed and low unless they keep taking it.

There has been concern about the use of khat and its effect on some of its regular users in the Somali community. While khat may be causing some problems for refugees from the war in Somalia its use needs to be viewed alongside the poverty and racism experienced by many of these people.

Related Links
Information on Khat and PAAN in Somali
Leaflets in other languages
NDAREC khat report 2009

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