Khat

Khat – A Drug of Growing Abuse

Asha Omar and Renée Besseling
Khat – a drug of growing abuse

A fact-based material for studies about the khat drug

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Cover picture: The khat-plant *Catha edulis*. Drawing from Hartwich (1911)

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Introduction

The National Association of Somali Women in Sweden and together with the Swedish National Association of Immigrants Against Drugs (SIMON) have taken the initiative to the khat educational material.

Our purpose is to stop the spread of drugs by using the force of knowledge and personal involvement.

In order to create a strong public opinion against khat and to support individual khat abusers, it is necessary to have basic knowledge about khat, about its history, about the development of a drug dependence, about consequences of khat abuse for the family and the economy etc.

In this booklet we write frankly about khat, about our views on drugs and about how the drug abuser is affected by his or her abuse. We approach the topic step by step with the aim of assisting group discussions founded on fact-based material.

The purpose of this study material, Khat – a drug of growing abuse, is to enable discussions and thinking about the khat drug. You are invited to start discussions together with your young people, your family and within your groups and acquaintances. In your study circle you can discuss how to handle a situation where somebody offers you khat or is chewing khat.

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Good luck in your studies!

Asha Omar Renée Besseling
1. Khat in history and today

Khat in history

Ever since ancient history, khat has been used in large areas in the Middle East and Africa. The oldest historical reference points to Alexander the Great sending khat to general Harrar as a cure for his melancholy.

In the year 1237 the effects of khat were mentioned for the first time in literature in ”The Book of Compound Drugs”, written by the Arabian physician Naguib Ad Din. The author proposed that khat would be used in the treatment of melancholy and depression and also as mood enhancer at social gatherings. Other authors from the same period noted khat was effective also to inhibit feelings of hunger and fatigue.

Long ago, Moslems used khat instead of alcohol. Khat was used by participants in religious ceremonies as a way of staying awake during long nightly prayer sessions. Other historic sources state that khat was given to soldiers to counter fatigue. Chewing khat for invigoration and recreation is believed to have originated in the areas around the Southern part of the Red Sea more than 800 years ago.

Khat and the Rules of Islam

Kat (qât in Arabic) got its Latin name catha edulis, ‘edible kat’, by the disciple of Linnaeus Peter Forsskål (who died 1763 in Yemen). It had then been cultivated and used, primarily in the Horn of Africa and in South Arabia, since ancient times, and the arrival of Islam to these areas in the seventh and eighth centuries had not changed this. A reason why the custom to use kat was not broken, was that kat is not expressly mentioned in the Koran, and neither is the word found in the Hadiths (the traditions about what the prophet Mohammed said and did).

But there is no shortage of arguments against the use of kat in the Koran and the Hadiths, because kat is an agent which induces intoxication and which can be said to ‘cloud intelligence’.
Here sakar seems to be described as something that is beneficial.

**But in Sura 2:219/216 it is said:**

They ask you about intoxicants (al-khamr) and gambling (maysir). Say, ‘In them there is a gross sin, and some benefits (manâfi‘) for the people. But their sinfulness far outweighs their benefit.’

**Sura 4:43/46 adds:**

O you who believe, do not approach the prayer while intoxicated (sukrâ), until you know what you are saying.

That it is forbidden is evident from what is said in Sura 5:90/92:

O you who believe, intoxicants, and may sir, and the altars of idols, and the games of chance are abominations of the devil; you shall avoid them, that you may succeed. The devil wants to provoke animosity and hatred among you through intoxicants and maysir, and to distract you from remembering God, and from observing the contact prayers. Will you then refrain?

Since the text in Sura 5 came as the last of these three texts, that is the one considered most binding, the one which is normative. It came during Mohammed’s very last time and must therefore be considered the ‘last word’ in this matter.

The problem is what can be counted as khamr (a word that can also be interpreted as ‘the fermented’) and sakar, whether it means that the ban includes everything that intoxicates, including narcotics, and whether the statements should be regarded as a ban or if it is a question about warnings about what is harmful. The warning about coming to prayers when intoxicated has sometimes been interpreted as intoxication being especially bad if you drink Thursday-Friday, and is drunk or having a hangover at the time for Friday prayers. The ban is supposed to have been revealed as a consequence of some persons appearing drunk at Friday prayers in Medina in the days of the prophet.
The Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh) has, as a rule, interpreted the texts so that every drug, which has an effect reminding of the one of wine and other alcohol, through the ‘analogy’ (qiyâs) also is forbidden. The learned specialists of fiqh mean that the reason (al-‘illa) for the ban on wine in the Koran is that one should not get intoxicated and as a consequence damage one’s intelligence and health. Therefore, one should avoid everything that is harmful in that way.

Such an analogy is supported by the Hadiths. This is for example the case with a story in one of the collection of Hadiths with the best reputation, Abû Husayn Muslim ibn al-Hajjâj’s as-Sahîh. There it is told that the prophet got a question from a man from Yemen about a drink used there called mizr. The answer was that the use was forbidden and that such a use leads to you having to drink A drink from hell... Mizr is a kind of ‘Abyssinian’ beer, manufactured from grain. As kat has an intoxicating effect and influences the mind in a similar way, i.e. can be classified as a narcotic agent, you can say that the use is contrary to both the Koran and Sunna. One of the well-known sages in Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), Ibn Hajar al-Haythâmî (died 1567) explained in an answer (fatwâ) to questions about the matter that kat must be considered shubuhât, ‘dubious things’ that ought to be avoided.

[The verse numbers for the Koran verses above are given first according to the so called Egyptian numbering which nowadays is the more common one, and then after / according to the ‘Syrian’ numbering which is the more common in earlier translations of the Koran.]

**Khat today**

Like alcohol, khat is not seen as having any proper medical use today. The substance is used only for its euphorizing and pleasant effects. Khat is used among certain ethnic groups mainly at some social gatherings.

Khat is much more than just a drug or a stimulant. It has become the central feature of a life style, and it also has a social function. Both in the Southwestern part of the Arabian Peninsula and in Africa, the chewing of khat has
taken on a ritual meaning and is carried out at major activities such as weddings, mediation between disputing parties etc. It also occurs that a khat party is organised for no other reason than getting together. Khat is also handed out to soldiers in order to help them endure the conditions of war.

Khat is mainly being chewed in private at home. Traders are chewing it in their shops or booths, taxi drivers in their cars and the afternoon shift workers at their workplaces.

Some people have brought this life style along when they have moved abroad. In the countries of immigration, for many years the use of khat as a drug has not been understood; instead it was believed that this life style was a part of a foreign culture. Thus khat-abusers have been left alone. Even when the authorities had their eyes opened to khat constituting a drug, the problem did not get any priority.

The ways of using khat have varied through the ages. Forty years ago, the chewing of khat was limited to rich people at weekends. Today, khat is being chewed by a large part of the population in e.g. Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda and Yemen. In Yemen, the regular workday ends between 2.00 and 3.00 PM. After that people gather in groups of 10 to 50 persons to have dinner and then chew khat. No food is served while khat is being chewed, except water to flush down the juices from the leaves when chewed. Three or four hours later, the party breaks up, after having been served tea with milk. After that no more work gets done that day. Generally, men and women use separate rooms when chewing khat. It has, however, become more common that men and women are chewing khat together. Sometimes, prostitutes are also invited to the chewing session.

Questions for discussion

✓ How was khat originally used?
✓ What does the Koran say about drugs?
✓ How has khat spread over the world?
2. What is khat?

Khat is a drug, taken from the parts above surface level of a plant called Catha edulis forsskaali. Like many other drugs, khat is known under many names, such as khat, kath, qat, qaad, chat, quat, tschat, mirra, Kus-es-Salahin, bushman’s tea, African tea and African salad.

In the beginning, the plant grew only in Ethiopia. Nowadays is grows wildly or is cultivated in large parts of Eastern Africa and in the South-western corner of the Arabian Peninsula (Aden, Yemen). Many farmers grow the plant for profit.

The size of the plant varies from a small bush (ca 40 cm tall) to a high tree (which can be up to 6 m tall). The largest commercial growing areas are by tradition to be found in the Haare Province in Ethiopia, on hillsides in Jebel Sabr mountains close to Taiz in Yemen and in the Nyambene area in the Meru district in Kenya.

The khat plant thrives upon fairly humid hillsides at altitudes from 1 100 to 2 500 meters, depending on the latitude. The size of the leaves varies between three and twelve centimetres. The flowers and small and white, and the fruit is oblong and dark brown. The fresh leaves produce the desired intoxication. The leaves are being chewed but can also be smoked or prepared as tea.

Khat is prohibited in the Arabian world. Immigrants who abuse khat smuggle it into countries such as the Emirates or Saudi Arabia, e.g. by pulverising the khat leaves. They sell the powder and make a considerable profit from it. Elderly people or those who lack teeth can have khat mixed with tea or water, and the mixture is then imbibed or sucked with a drinking straw like juice.

The use of khat occurs mainly in the growing areas. In recent years, major plantations have been laid out primarily in Kenya, and also in Ethiopia. Traditional coffee growers have switched to growing khat. The demand has spread all over the world and increased the export in a dynamic way.

Perishable merchandise

Khat is a perishable merchandise. Freshly picked leaves are the ones most sought after as intoxicants. The most common way of using khat is to chew the fresh leaves and swallow the extract. As the strength of the drug decreases rapidly, the khat leaves after harvesting are wrapped up in banana leaves or plastic bags to maintain humidity and freshness for a longer period. During transport water is often sprayed on the leaves to maintain humidity. Khat can also be dried, crushed or pulverised. Fast air connections make it possible to provide khat abusers all over the world with fresh khat.
Khat is a gateway drug, like tobacco, alcohol and cannabis, i.e. a point of entry into other drugs.

Questions for discussion

How was khat originally used?

How is khat generally taken?

What does the Koran say about the use of intoxicating drugs?

How has khat spread over the world?

3. Criminality and legislation

Khat is prohibited in several African countries and in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia has strict legislation and seizes a lot of khat. In the 1980s the dictator Siad Barre prohibited khat in Somalia. After he was ousted in 1991, the abuse of khat increased dramatically in the country. During the civil war in Somalia, many children grew up with khat abuse in their surroundings. Women started selling khat to be able to support their children.

Today an increasing number of women are abusing khat, but children as young as twelve years old are chewing khat. This creates serious problems within the families. The myth is still upheld that khat can be used as a medical drug, e.g. against diabetes.

Some countries try to limit the use of khat, even if is not officially prohibited. In e.g. South Yemen, the use is limited to Thursdays and Fridays. In North Yemen, official employees ”ought” to refrain from khat until after 2.00 PM.

In Sweden, khat was scheduled as a narcotic drug in 1989. Since then it is listed in the drug schedules of the Swedish Medical Products Agency (in the beginning on the drug schedules of the Swedish Board of Health and Welfare). The drug is prohibited in Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Norway, Saudi Arabia, Sweden and USA, just to mention a few countries. In Sweden, the fighting of khat trade and khat abuse has low priority.

Khat is not listed on the United Nations’ schedules of narcotic drugs or psychotropic substances. Nevertheless, the psychoactive substances in khat, cathine and cathinone, are listed among the substances classified by the United Nations as psychotropic substances and consequently illegal. Cathine is the weaker of the two when it comes to centrally stimulating effects. Cathinone is the main psychoactive substance in khat and has a strong centrally stimulating effect. For many years, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has described the khat plant as particularly detrimental and recommended that the plant be regulated as an internationally controlled drug.
Seizures of khat

In Sweden it is required that large amounts are discovered at a raid in order for the drug crime to be considered as a gross crime. The lower limit for a gross crime for a long time was 400 kg, but it has recently been changed to 200 kg. A possession of 4kg – 200kg khat is considered to be a drug crime (at the “normal level”). If the amount is below 4 kg the drug crime is considered petty.

In the United Kingdom, the law only calls for a licence to import vegetables in order to permit a person to bring khat into the country. In the Netherlands, khat is legal as a crop, and only a certificate of freshness is required. The amount of khat arriving every day to London from the producer countries is estimated to be between five and seven metric tons. As long as The United Kingdom and the Netherlands are maintaining this liberal legislation, big Boeing airplanes filled with khat will continue to fly to London and Amsterdam. From there it is smuggled on to other countries, such as Sweden.

In order to keep the trade in khat going to Europe and USA, the traders are dependent upon these airports being kept open for importation and transit. It is a matter of large amounts of money, for the drug traders as well as the airports, which collect a lot of money every time an airplane lands. A global ban on khat under the auspices of the United Nations is therefore considered desirable.

"Anything delaying integration of immigrants in the new country of domicile -- such as permitting drug abuse by making reference to cultural sensitivity -- is deleterious in the long run and can contribute to social disruption, which has been seen in France and Germany earlier this year in the Moslem population. That the Somalis in Great Britain understand this but strangely enough not the Home Office speaks for a positive future for the Somalis. That Great Britain permits the import of the drug with a kind of cultural sensitivity, in spite of 600 interviews with affected people who want to prohibit importation, is nothing but a misdirected policy."

John Coleman, President DWI
Couriers

The smuggling of khat to Sweden is done using ferries or cars, through Germany and Denmark to Skåne and by air cargo and couriers at Stockholm Arlanda and Gothenburg Landvetter airports. Cars have become the most common way of smuggling khat into Sweden, and then primarily through Skåne. Many seizures are nowadays also made from travellers in buses or trains. The organisations using these modus operandi recruit many couriers, preferably young people, who may commute several times a day by train to smuggle shipments broken up into small parts. Among the couriers arrested, eleven have been 18 years old or younger. The youngsters are most commonly of Swedish or Danish nationality. The smuggling operation is very well organised, being run by big international networks, which can operate mostly unobstructed. (NOVA Report 1/06)

Questions for discussion

- Which countries prohibit khat?
- How much khat was seized by the Customs between the years 2000 and 2006?
- Why is khat abuse increasing in Sweden?
4. Financial aspects of khat abuse

The private family economy suffers severely when any family member is abusing khat. Abuse of khat, like abuse other drugs, often causes considerable social and economic problems. Just like other drugs, khat is expensive, and families with a member chewing khat often experience difficulties in keeping the private economy afloat. Up to one third of the disposable income may be used for the purchase of khat.

Khat distributors are in the same way as other drug distributors part of the criminal world. The sale of khat is seen as producing easy money, and some people choose to devote themselves to this type of sales instead of a common trade. The difficulties of finding work may be an explanation of why a person chooses to start trading in khat. Small traders are often in the arms of criminal drug gangs. Violence and threats of violence against these small business couriers is very common.

The great demand for the drug has caused many farmers in East African countries to choose growing khat instead of traditional crops. In particular the number of coffee plantations has decreased dramatically. According to a report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Ethiopia and Kenya are the top khat producing countries of the world. There, the farmers get five times the payment for khat as they get for coffee. Also, the drug is easier to grow and – differing from coffee – it can be harvested twice a year. This makes it difficult to fight the growing of khat.

Foreign investors, who want to invest in the world’s agricultural development, are hesitant to invest in countries where farmers are changing their production to growing khat. This inhibits the development of the national economies of the afflicted countries.

**Question for discussion**

How do you motivate a poor farmer to grow other plants when he or she indeed does make more money from growing khat?
Personal story I

Two young people, living in Somalia, fell in love and got married. After completing university studies, they had two children. Before the civil war they moved to a small municipality in Southern Sweden. None of them had been chewing khat in Somalia. Their stay in Sweden was initially without problems. The man was loving and assisted and cared for the family in a proper way. He was involved in the children and often brought them outdoors for playing.

Two years later, the family moved to Malmö. Then the problems started. The man got many new friends, who were chewing khat, and himself he started chewing khat once a month. Then it was once a week and after a while every day. He also started smoking cigarettes. He turned the day into night and the other way around. He was out with his buddies during the nights and slept during the days, so he could not even see his children. When he was not having access to khat, he got irritated and angry, which he acted out on his children and his wife. In that period it could be difficult to find khat in Malmö, so he and other people often travelled by ferry to Copenhagen. The children asked their father if he were sick, as he was always sleeping so much and always was tired.

He was chewing khat ever more frequently and not taking care of himself. He did not attend to his hygiene, even his gums decayed. He did not care for his children and did not even want to talk to them. They were very ill at ease. He lived in another world and imagined all the time that he would become rich. When he was chewing khat he talked a lot about his dreams of getting rich.

The mother felt alone. The couple had another child. The man was not working but lived on study allowances, which were quickly consumed. He got back home only to eat and sleep, to change clothes and to ask for money. The wife did not allow him to chew khat at home, so that the children could be exposed to a bad role model. If the wife complained and questioned his life style he turned rough and nasty towards her.

The very same man, who earlier had been kind and understanding had become like a monster, completely changed. Finally, the wife could not stand it anymore and he was forced to choose between the family and khat. He choose khat. Still today, he does not understand khat was the cause of all his problems.

Personal story II

A family consisting of parents and two children were living in Somalia. The man was chewing khat also at that time. When the civil war started, the family moved to Sweden. Here, the man continued chewing khat. The family was extended by an additional child, and the woman found it strenuous that the man was always away with his buddies. In order to keep him at home, she also started chewing khat. She thought that if she started chewing khat with him at home, her situation would improve.
Then, the conflicts within the family escalated. Due to her khat abuse the woman could not take care of the children and received no help from the man. She got very tired and the man did not want her chewing khat, as she was expected to take care of the home and the children. Finally, they got a divorce. The man decided to move to England in order get out of all problems and avoid the responsibility for the family. The woman continued to abuse khat and could not herself take care of the children. The local social services were called in, when they saw that the children were not faring well. They kept watching the mother. She could not stop her khat abuse by herself and got no help with her problems, so she also decided to move to England. The children, who were born in Somalia, entered their teenage period, and they also started chewing khat and smoking cigarettes. The mother felt relieved when the teenagers started chewing khat instead of using other drugs, as she herself did not consider khat to be a drug. The money was never sufficient. The mother was not working, and the youngsters could not continue their studies, which lead to them starting to steal and joining criminal gangs. One of the daughters who was chewing khat became dependent. She took up prostitution to be able to afford her abuse. The family was broken up, and that is a tragedy.

Questions for discussion

Do you know of similar stories in your circles?
How are families, children, women and society affected when a person is chewing khat habitually?
How is it possible to save a relationship?
How would you have reacted?
6. Khat and health

The main effects of khat are centrally stimulating, and they are twofold. First, there is a feeling of wellbeing and euphoria. The intoxicated person has a feeling of being elated and talks a lot, and then the effects wear off into a hang-over with feelings of melancholy, which turns into irritability and anxiety. The intoxication starts about 10 minutes after the swallowing of the saliva from chewing the khat leaves and lasts between 30 minutes and 6 hours. A khat abuser can be recognized from his or her staring gaze and grey lips.

People who chew a lot of khat also commonly smoke a lot of tobacco. Through that, they expose themselves to all the diseases associated with smoking, such as airway trouble, pulmonary tuberculosis and bronchitis.

Signs indicating that a person is chewing khat

Pulse and respiration increase. Body temperature goes up and the person becomes very thirsty. The pupils become enlarged and the person turns hyperactive. Blood pressure increases, too.

Khat chewers become talkative, elated, and get a feeling of wellbeing and power and elevated self-esteem. They have a feeling of having a good memory, good intellectual powers, they believe that they are able to solve all problems. They do, however, also feel anxiety, irritability and confusion and they become restless, aggressive and have thoughts of persecution.

- Risks affecting physical impairments and injuries
- Heart infarction
- Myocardial inflammation
- Gastroenteral diseases
- Liver injuries
- Oesophageal cancer
- Dental injuries
- HIV, tuberculosis infections
- Sexual disorders
- Haemorrhoids
- Internal bleeding
- Weight loss
- Constipation
- Sleeping problems
- Dryness of the mouth
Khat causes cellular changes in the mouth, which can lead to cancer. In the same way, oesophageal cancer has been connected to khat chewing.  

*Cicero, No. 11, 01.07.01.*

Risks affecting mental disturbances and injuries

- Migraine
- Irritation
- Recurrent depressions
- Paranoia
- Acute psychoses and delusional states
- Delirium, hallucinations and aggressiveness
- Long term abuse of khat has been reported to cause suicide

Diabetes and stroke are feared to be sequelae to the chewing of khat.

The risk for social marginalization is considerable in countries and families chewing khat.

**Facts:**

Pregnant women chewing khat deliver children with lower birth weight, which can cause increased infant mortality.

**Questions for discussion**

How can you tell if someone is under the influence of khat?
State some consequences of khat abuse!
How is the unborn child affected when the mother is chewing khat?

7. Dependence

A dependence is a compulsory desire for the pleasurable effects of the intoxication caused by the drug. Compulsiveness is a characteristic feature for all types of dependence. The dependence is the driving force for the continuation of the intake of the drug. The drugs govern the everyday living of the drug abuser.

The definition of a drug dependence by the WHO is a "compulsion to take the drug continuously or periodically to experience the psychic effects of the drug."
Questions for discussion

What is a dependence?
What substances can produce dependence?
Do you know any person who is dependent?
What are the consequences of a dependence?
Is it possible to become dependent upon khat?

8. Methcathinone

Methcathinone, also called ephedrine or ”cat” and ”jeff”, is a fully synthetic drug, which can be injected. It is a rapidly dependence-producing variety of cathinone, which occurs naturally in khat. For distribution on the illegal market, methcathinone is commonly produced in simple laboratories from common chemicals, including dangerous acids. The substance has been clinically tried in medical care as an anti-depressant and a diet pill, but today it is prohibited. Methcathinone can be closely compared with crack (cocaine base) when it comes to effects and risks. Methcathinone abusers can get very speeded up, taking methcathinone for up to a week and not being able to sleep during this period.

Drugs are prohibited because they are dangerous to the individual, the family, society at large and the environment.

9. Drug Control by the United Nations

International conventions and agreements about controlling drugs have been in force for close to 100 years. Already when the United Nations were founded on 24 October 1945, the organisation took up drug control as one of its tasks.

Today, three international U.N. drug convention are in force: the 1961 Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, the 1971 Convention on Psychotropic Substances, and the 1988 Convention Against the Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. All drug conventions expressly state that the substances under control may be used only for scientific and medical purposes. This means that these substances may not be used as social intoxicants.

Together with the World Health Organisation (WHO), the United Nations have set up a list of substances under international control. (www.incb.org). Khat is not yet scheduled as an internationally controlled drug. Cathine and cathinone, the psychoactive ingredients in khat, are scheduled as narcotic drugs and are listed in the 1971 convention. There are proposals for an international prohibition also of the
26 June – The international day against drugs

In 1987 the United Nations International Conference on Drug Abuse and International Traffic, decided that the international day against drugs was to be celebrated on the 26 June. At this conference, the U.N. Secretary General Javier Peres de Cuellar in his concluding speech gave the following message:

”Together we can and must put a stop to this form of modern-day slavery called drug addiction;

together we can put an end to the violence, which it has spawned;
together we can discharge our obligation to create a drug-free society for future generations;
together we can ensure that the forces of life and hope will triumph over the forces of death and despair.

This is the responsibility which the world community has placed upon all of us here today”.

Questions for discussion:

Which functions do the international drug conventions have?
Should khat be controlled in the same way as other drugs?
How is society affected by the chewing of khat in the country of emigration and in Sweden?
How does khat consumption affect the economy of the affected families?
Who make a profit from the abuse of khat?
10. Resources

Publications


Web resources
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC): [www.unodc.org](http://www.unodc.org) (home Page with material on international drug control, current international conventions etc). Europe Against Drugs (EURAD) [www.eurad.net](http://www.eurad.net) for (home page with material on drugs).

Khat in banana leaves ready for export. One day’s consumption of khat is called a marduf and contains four or five stems (Qeyb) and weighs about 200 grams. A marduf costs between 200 and 400 SEK (21- and 42 euro). Chewing one marduf three times a week has a cost of between 2400 and 4800 SEK (255 and 297 euro) a month. In Denmark khat is considerably cheaper.