

Unregulated Highs: Intoxicating Hemp

October 2025

A Public Health Blind Spot

In recent years, there has been an increase in stores selling high-potency, unregulated products like hemp (e.g., Delta-8), kratom (a quasi-opiate), and other psychoactive products (e.g., hallucinogens). Despite their potent effects, these products are being sold legally, falling outside most regulatory frameworks, and are often sold alongside snacks and energy drinks with few, if any, age purchasing requirements. In this *Unregulated Highs* series, we provide key information about what these products are, how they came to be, and what our local Cleveland data show.

What is Intoxicating Hemp?

Hemp and cannabis are the same plant, called *Cannabis sativa* L. The 2018 U.S. Farm Bill legalized hemp, defining it as an industrial and agricultural crop with 0.3% or less of Delta-9 THC (the main chemical that causes a “high”), distinguishing it from cannabis. One of the most familiar products most often made from low-THC hemp plants, **cannabidiol (CBD)**, **can be converted to psychoactive forms of THC through a number of chemical processes, producing intoxicating hemp**. While chemically similar to Delta-9, these THCs have varying effects and potencies. For example, Delta-8 is known for having weaker effects (“diet weed”), but some types, like THC-P, can be much stronger—up to 33 times more potent than the naturally occurring Delta-9 THC.¹



What do Products Look Like?

Intoxicating hemp comes in various forms, including combustibles (e.g., pre-rolled joints, blunts, vapes) and edibles (e.g., gummies, baked goods, beverages). Many products are often marketed with **colorful packaging and candy-like flavors** that may appeal particularly to youth. **Limited oversight may also affect the accuracy and clarity of product labels**, causing confusion about serving sizes and potential risks. For example, the nutrition label on the right states that each serving size is “1 Chew” and that there are 30 servings per container. Yet, the package contains only two gummies.

What are the Risks?

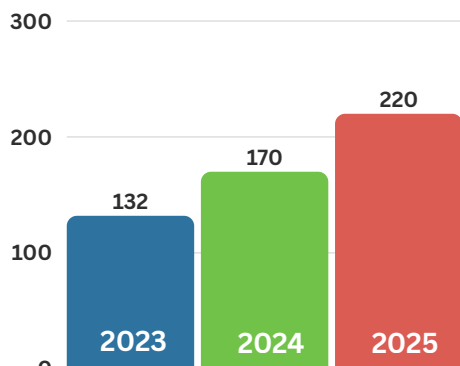
As these products are relatively new, their effects on health are still being studied. However, based on the known effects of regulated cannabis, potential health concerns include **respiratory issues** (from smoke inhalation) and **poorer mental health outcomes**. Youth exposure to THC can have **lasting impacts on brain development**.² **High-potency THC can also magnify the associated risks**.³ In Ohio, the Division of Cannabis Control caps individual serving sizes to a maximum of 500mg in total THC content; packages to 1,500mg.⁴ However, there is no such limit on the amount of THC in intoxicating hemp. For example, in the label on the right, this package is presumed to have 2,000mg of THC, thus exceeding the THC limits set for Ohio’s regulated cannabis.

Nutrition Facts	
Serving Size 1 Chew (20g)	
Servings Per Container 30	
Amount Per Serving	
Calories 90	
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 0g	0%
Saturated Fat 0g	0%
sodium 7.5mg	16%
Total Carbohydrate 12g	9%
Sugars 6g	12%
Includes 6g Added Sugars	12%
Protein 3mg	1%
1,000mg:	
Delta-8, Delta-9, THCP, HHCP	
Vitamin C	
Calcium 3g	0%
Potassium 1.5mg	<1%
Iron	0%
* Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet. Your Daily Values may be higher or lower depending on your daily needs.	
INGREDIENTS: CORN SYRUP, SUGAR, WATER, GELATIN, CITRIC ACID, NATURAL FLAVORS, PECTIN, VEGETABLE OIL & CARNAUBA LEAF WAX, FOOD COLORING, HEMP OIL EXTRACT.	

Intoxicating Hemp: A Cleveland Snapshot

Retail Availability in Cleveland, Ohio

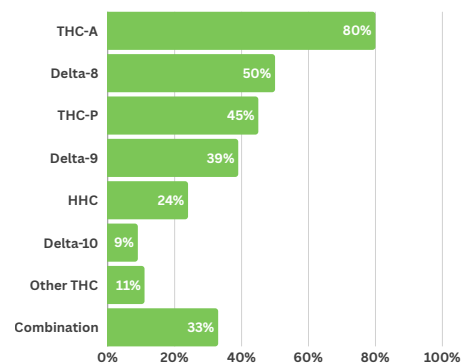
In 2023, the PRCHN expanded its Cleveland Inventory of Food and Tobacco Retailers to include the availability of intoxicating hemp in tobacco retailers such as gas stations and corner stores. The most common forms found were **pre-rolled joints or blunts (80%)** and **edible gummies (74%)**. **THC-A was the most common** form of THC available in the City (80%)--THC-A is unique in that it does not become psychoactive until it is combusted, or set on fire, and can be derived from either cannabis or hemp.



Since 2023, there has been a **67%** increase in availability of intoxicating hemp products in retailers.



Pre-rolls (80%) and **gummies (74%)** were the most commonly available types across retailers.



THC-A was the most prevalent form of THC available among retailers (**80%**).

Adult Use of Intoxicating Hemp

In the 2025 Cleveland Health Survey, 11% of adults (ages 18 and older) said they used intoxicating hemp in the past 30 days, which is about half as many as those who reported use of traditional cannabis (24%). Those who use hemp were **most likely to smoke it in a joint, bong, or pipe (74%)** or **eat it as a gummy (44%)**. **Just over a fourth (28%)** of those who use intoxicating hemp were **unsure about the kind of THC** they use, but among those who do know, most (64%) reported use of THC-A.

11%

of adults reported using intoxicating hemp products in the past 30 days.

74%

usually smoked their hemp as a joint or blunt or in a bong or pipe.



1 in 4 people who use intoxicating hemp are not aware what kind of THC they used.

References:

1. Citti C, Linciano P, Russo F, Luongo L, Iannotta M, Maione S, Laganà A, Capriotti AL, Forni F, Vandelli MA, Gigli G. A novel phytocannabinoid isolated from Cannabis sativa L. with an in vivo cannabimimetic activity higher than Δ9-tetrahydrocannabinol: Δ9-Tetrahydrocannabiphlorol. Scientific reports. 2019 Dec 30;9(1):20335.
2. National Institute on Drug Abuse. Cannabis (Marijuana). (2024). Available from: <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/cannabis-marijuana#relationship-cannabis-mental-health>
3. Stuyt E. The problem with the current high potency THC marijuana from the perspective of an addiction psychiatrist. Missouri medicine. 2018 Nov;115(6):482.
4. Ohio Division of Cannabis Control. Guidance - Single Serving Units. (2025). Available from: https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/com.ohio.gov/DCC/Guidance/Dispensaries/DCC_SSU_Guidance.pdf

Data Sources: (1) 2025 Cleveland Health Survey conducted by the Prevention Research Center for Healthy Neighborhoods in collaboration with the Cleveland Department of Public Health. Methodology is available at <https://prchn.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/2025-Cleveland-Health-Survey-Methodology-Report.pdf> Results are available at: <https://prchn.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/2025-Cleveland-Health-Survey-Overall.pdf> (2) 2025 Cleveland Inventory of Food and Tobacco Retailers is conducted by the Prevention Research Center for Healthy Neighborhoods; more information is available at: <https://prchn.org/ciftr/>.

Image Sources: Images provided by PRCHN staff and/or students.

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