

Drugs, Risk Reduction and Overdose



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Here you will find some information on some of the more commonly used drugs that family members ask us about. We include information about how they are used, their effect, some of the risks associated with their use, how to minimise harm and some of the physical symptoms of someone who is using these drugs.

If you are concerned about a loved one who you believe is using any of these drugs or any other drugs, you can contact our free, confidential helpline on: 08080 10 10 11 helpline@sfad.org.uk.

For more information on the different categories of drugs and their effects, you can visit:
<http://www.thedrugswheel.com/>

It is also important to note that there is no guarantee with any illicit drugs that they contain what they say they contain without testing. So effects and risks can vary greatly depending on both doseage of the intended active ingredient and the effects of the other ingredients that may be mixed in.

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CANNABIS



Also goes by: weed, grass, hash, dope, wacky backy, pot, marijuana

Class B Drug

Category: cannabinoid

How long to take effect: almost instant depending on how it is taken

How long it stays in your body: a few days after use, or up to 56 days after stopping long-term use

How can it be taken: cannabis can be smoked in a joint, pipe, bong, or from a vaporiser and may also be eaten

What it looks like: it can come as a compressed block of resin in various shades of brown, as a herbal blend with dried leaves and bud in various shades of green, as an oil suspension or as a concentrated resin called shatter - which normally looks like hard honey

Signs of use: lack of motivation; strong, musky smell; bloodshot, tired eyes; dry mouth; increased hunger- usually for snack foods; giggly/laughing

What does it do? - Cannabis can affect all five senses, it alters your perception and the way you see, hear, feel, smell, or touch things in the world. Colours can appear brighter and music can sound better. Taking cannabis can make you feel relaxed and chilled out, or anxious and paranoid. It can also make you feel hungry or nauseous and sick. In larger amounts or with more frequent use, you may regularly feel withdrawn, tired or anxious.

Risks - Mixing cannabis with alcohol can make you feel sick, particularly if alcohol is drank before taking cannabis. It can cause you to freak out - feelings of anxiety, suspicion and paranoia. It can affect the way the brain works and regular use can increase the chance of developing mental health issues, particularly if mental health issues are genetic. Frequent use can cause memory loss, dizziness and sickness.

Risk reduction

- Avoid mixing with alcohol and other drugs
- Avoid smoking with tobacco, this adds a further 4000 chemicals to the body
- Use short puffs when inhaling, longer inhales will not increase the effect but can damage lungs
- Use a pipe, bong or vaporiser but make sure to measure doses
- Be considerate of other people who may be around you when smoking cannabis

COCAINE



Also goes by: coke, base, freebase, charlie, blow, white, ching, snow, rocks

Class A Drug

Category: stimulant

How long to take effect: 30 seconds to 2 minutes

How long it stays in your body: up to 7 days after use

How can it be taken: usually snorted but it can be swallowed in a cigarette paper (called bombs) or injected into a vein

What it looks like: usually comes as a white crystallised powder

Signs of use: agitated; dilated pupils; dry mouth; regular nose bleeds; sniffing/blowing nose; decreased appetite

What does it do? - Cocaine causes the body to speed up. It increases heart rate, breathing rate and increases core temperature. It can make you feel energetic and confident. It can also make you feel fidgety, euphoric, talkative, mentally alert and temporarily decreases the need for food and sleep. It can cause restlessness, irritability, anxiety, panic attacks and paranoia.

Risks - Large amounts of cocaine may intensify the high but can also lead to bizarre, erratic and violent behaviour. This can lead to medical complications including disturbances in heart rhythm, heart attacks, strokes and seizures. Injecting cocaine is more risky than snorting and can increase the risk of contracting blood borne viruses like HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C.

If you take cocaine you may feel a need to redose often which will lead to increased damage and increased risk of dependence. Taking cocaine with alcohol can also reduce your awareness of how drunk you are, meaning you may drink more which causes more harm.

Risk reduction

- Avoid mixing with alcohol, this forms another drug called cocaethylene which is more toxic
- Avoid mixing with other drugs
- If snorting or injecting, don't share any equipment and avoid using bank notes
- Only take a small dose, especially if using for the first time
- Eat and sleep well before and after taking cocaine to replace energy and nutrients lost

You can overdose on cocaine - full information on overdose signs and symptoms are found on page 16-17

HEROIN



Also goes by: smack, kit, gear

Class A Drug

Category: opioid

How long to take effect: anywhere between 10 seconds to 5 minutes

How long it stays in your body: 3 to 5 hours after use

How can it be taken: can be smoked usually by burning it on tinfoil, snorted, or injected

What it looks like: typically comes as an off-white or light brown to dark brown powder

Signs of use: 'pinprick' pupils; slowed or slurred speech; drowsy or relaxed; itchy skin; pale, sweaty skin

What does it do? - A small dose of heroin gives a feeling of warmth and wellbeing, bigger doses can make you sleepy and relaxed. The first dose of heroin can bring about dizziness and vomiting. It slows down the way the body works and is a very strong painkiller.

Risks - The effects of heroin can last for a number of hours so it is important to be careful using any other alcohol or drugs. If you take heroin regularly you may build some tolerance - if you stop heroin for a few days the tolerance will drop, if you then take the same dose as before you are at a high risk of an overdose. Sharing injecting equipment can spread blood-borne viruses such as HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C. There is a risk to death if you inhale/choke on vomit in your sleep, heroin sedates and stops you coughing properly, vomit can remain in your airways so you can't breathe.

Risk reduction

- Avoid mixing with alcohol as overdose is a high risk
- Avoid mixing with other drugs as overdose is a high risk
- Smoke or snort, do not inject as it can damage veins and arteries which can lead to gangrene
- Smoking is less risky to injecting
- Avoid taking it alone, have people around you with naloxone and who can call an ambulance

Be aware that some heroin has been cut with the drug fentanyl which is estimated to be 20 times stronger than heroin and is a huge risk to overdose

You can overdose on heroin - full information on overdose signs and symptoms are found on page 16-17

ECSTASY



Also goes by: e's, eccies, disco biscuits, sweeties, swedgers, pills, MDMA

Class A Drug

Category: empathogen

How long to take effect: up to 45 minutes

How long it stays in your body: up to 4 days

How can it be taken: usually swallowed

What it looks like: comes as pills which usually have a distinct logo on them and come in a variety of colours, shapes and sizes

Signs of use: dilated pupils; chatty and enthusiastic; swinging or rigid jaw; decreased appetite; dry mouth; sweating

What does it do? - Ecstasy increases heart rate, breathing rate and increases core temperature. It can make you feel euphoric, energetic, talkative, fidgety, mentally alert and temporarily reduces the need for food and sleep. It makes you feel strong love and affection for the people around them. While waiting for the pill to take effect, there may be feelings of anxiety or sickness. Ecstasy can cause restlessness and dilation of pupils. Most people buy ecstasy pills that they expect to contain the chemical MDMA.

Risks - Taking ecstasy can make you angry, confused, and suffer panic attacks. There is no set amount of MDMA in pills so there can be a huge difference in each batch. An increase of energy and dancing for long periods of time in a hot atmosphere increases the chance of overheating and dehydration, which in some cases can lead to death. Using ecstasy regularly can disturb sleeping patterns, cause psychological dependence, and paranoia and depression. It is vital that you stay hydrated if taking ecstasy.

Ecstasy pills containing MDMA can last 4-6 hours and when the effects wear off, the comedown can last 3-4 days which may leave you feeling low and irritable.

Risk reduction

- Not all ecstasy pills are the same, get them tested before swallowing
- Only take 1/4 or 1/2 tablet to test strength and effects - wait 2 hours before taking another dose
- Avoid mixing with other drugs
- Avoid mixing with alcohol as this increases dehydration
- Try to drink no more than one pint of water per hour, do not drink over a pint as this is also dangerous

You can overdose on ecstasy- full information on overdose signs and symptoms are found on page 16-17

BENZODIAZEPINES



Also goes by: benzos, jellies, blues, vallies, moggies, eggs

Class C Drug if not prescribed to you by a doctor

Category: depressant

How long to take effect: 45 to 60 minutes

How long it stays in your body: 3 to 7 days

How can it be taken: usually swallowed

What it looks like: come as tablets or capsules in various sizes, shapes and colours

Signs of use: slowed or slurred speech; potentially argumentative or aggressive; confusion; drowsiness

What does it do? - Benzodiazepines slow down heart rate, breathing rate, lowers core temperature, and can affect vision and coordination. They can also cause drowsiness and long periods of sleep. You may experience slurred speech, lowered inhibitions, slower reaction times and dizziness. Benzodiazepines are usually used to relieve tension, anxiety, stress or to help with disturbed sleep.

Risks - Taking benzodiazepines can make you forgetful, it can change your behaviour, make you aggressive, give you panic attacks and make you sick. You may have difficulty concentrating, headaches, nausea, vomiting, anxiety, depression, tremors and fits. There is also a chance you can experience short term memory loss and develop a dependency after only a few weeks of use.

Risk reduction

- Only take benzodiazepines if they are prescribed to you by a qualified doctor
- Avoid mixing with other drugs, especially alcohol as it can cause blackouts
- Watch your drink when out as some benzodiazepines are used to spike drinks
- Sleep on your side to avoid choking if you throw up
- Withdrawl symptoms can happen after short periods of use, do not take for more than 4-6 weeks

You can overdose on benzodiazepines - full information on overdose signs and symptoms are found on page 16-17

NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES (NPS)



Various names: spice, black mamba, 'legal highs' (they are illegal)- there are many names for these drugs

Class A, B and C - covered by Misuse of Drugs Act and Psychoactive Substances Act

Category: varies

How long to take effect: almost instant depending on how you are taking it

How long it stays in your body: a few days after use

How can it be taken: usually smoked

What it looks like: usually as a powder, pill or herbal form in colourful packets

Signs of use: signs can vary depending on the category of drug that the NPS is trying to mimic

What does it do? - NPS drugs are made from assorted chemicals, extracts, or herbs which mimic the effects of some drugs such as LSD, cocaine, MDMA and cannabis. Little is known about the short and long term effects due to the drugs constantly changing and because NPS is such a broad category, the effects are diverse. The goal of NPS is to mimic the effects of other drugs, they are more exaggerated and unpredictable. Taking NPS gives an intense but short lived high, enhanced sensations, feelings of heaviness, nausea, anxiety, paranoia and heart palpitations.

Risks - These drugs are untested and unregulated. They are extremely dangerous because they can literally contain anything. There are reports of an increase in severe mental health issues including 'detachment from reality', suicidal thoughts and depression. Physical withdrawal includes seizures, shakes, sweating and insomnia. Psychological withdrawal symptoms include depression, anxiety, paranoia and aggression.

Risk reduction

- Avoid injecting, instead snort or swallow as injecting can damage veins
- If you choose to inject avoid sharing any injecting equipment
- Avoid mixing with other drugs or alcohol
- Only use a small amount of the drug, especially if using it for the first time
- Potency is variable, dose carefully
- Control doses by measuring amounts

You can overdose on NPS drugs - full information on overdose signs and symptoms are found on page 16-17

SPEED



Also goes by: whizz, sulph, poor man's cocaine, paste, base

Class A Drug if prepared for injection, Class B Drug if in powder form

Category: stimulant

How long to take effect: up to 30 minutes

How long it stays in your body: up to 3 days after use

How can it be taken: usually snorted but can be swallowed in a cigarette paper (bomb), in a pill, diluted in juice or injected into a vein

What it looks like: looks like an off-white or pinkish powder

Signs of use: dilated pupils; fast, agitated speech; talkativeness; sweating; dry mouth

What does it do? - Speed increases heart rate, breathing rate and increases core temperature. It can make you feel euphoric, energetic, talkative, fidgety, mentally alert and reduces the need for food and sleep. Speed can cause restlessness, irritability, anxiety, panic and paranoia. Other effects include jaw clenching, restlessness, and aggression.

Risks - Speed causes a major reduction in appetite and can make it difficult to sleep or relax after using. The comedown can last a number of days and can be very difficult to manage. It can cause prolonged problems with concentration, anxiety and aggression.

Risk reduction

- Avoid injecting, instead swallow as injecting can damage veins and arteries
- If you choose to inject avoid sharing any equipment as this can spread blood borne viruses
- Avoid mixing with other drugs or alcohol
- Eat and sleep well before and after taking to replace energy and nutrients lost during use

You can overdose on speed - full information on overdose signs and symptoms are found on page 16-17

KETAMINE



Also goes by: ket, special k, vitamin k, super acid, love drug, k

Class B Drug

Category: dissociative

How long to take effect: up to 45 minutes if swallowed, up to 5 minutes if injected

How long it stays in your body: up to 7 days after use

How can it be taken: can be snorted, injected into a muscle or swallowed in a cigarette paper

What it looks like: comes as an off-white powder to a clear odourless liquid

Signs of use: disorientated; slowed speech; dissociation from body and/or mind; dilated pupils; difficulty walking; giggly/laughing

What does it do? - Ketamine is a powerful general anaesthetic which stops you feeling pain, can cause paralysis of the muscles, distortion of reality, floating feelings, relaxation and hallucinations. Ketamine is a powerful dissociative drug, it causes out of body experiences in higher doses and can temporarily paralyse you.

Risks - Ketamine can cause dangerous increases in heart rate and blood pressure, it can also make you feel confused, agitated, delirious, and disconnected from reality. Larger doses of ketamine can affect your balance and coordination. Frequent and/or long term use of ketamine can damage the bladder - urine can be bloody and contain bladder tissues. Ketamine can also cause abdominal pain and blood clots.

Risk reduction

- Avoid drinking ketamine and avoid injecting into veins, inject into muscle tissue instead
- If you choose to inject avoid sharing any equipment as this can spread blood borne viruses
- Avoid mixing other drugs or alcohol
- Only use a small amount of the drug, especially if using for the first time
- Make sure you have friends around you if using and be somewhere quiet and calm
- If snorting, grind down to a fine powder to prevent damage to your nose - clean nostrils with clean water after use
- Ketamine can affect your balance, try to stay in a hazard free environment

You can overdose on ketamine - full information on overdose signs and symptoms are found on page 16-17

METHADONE



Also goes by: mixture, linctus, meth

Class A Drug

Category: opioid

How long to take effect: 30-60 minutes if drank

How long it stays in your body: up to 48 hours

How can it be taken: usually swallowed

What it looks like: usually comes as a bright green liquid

Signs of use: slowed/slurred speech; sweet smell from breath; drowsy/relaxed

What does it do? - Methadone is generally prescribed by doctors as a substitute to heroin or other opiates. It has similar effects to heroin but does not have the same kind of buzz or high as heroin. Methadone can reduce physical and psychological pain, it can make you have feelings of warmth, relaxation and detachment. It can also relieve feelings of anxiety.

Risks - Methadone has similar effects to heroin which means you can become addicted. Similar to other drugs, you can go through withdrawal from methadone if use is stopped suddenly. Withdrawal effects include upset stomach, sweating, nausea, vomiting, paranoia and delusions.

Methadone can also be bought - known commonly as 'street methadone'. This is not controlled or measured by pharmacists and can potentially be lethal.

Risk reduction

- Only take methadone if it is prescribed to you by a doctor who will monitor your dosage
- Avoid mixing with other drugs or alcohol, this can have serious consequences
- Strength of street methadone will vary and is not tested
- Only use a small amount of the drug, especially if using for the first time
- Make sure you have friends around you to phone an ambulance if needed

You can overdose on methadone - full information on overdose signs and symptoms are found on page 16-17

XANAX



Class C Drug

Category: depressant

How long to take effect: around 20 to 40 minutes

How long it stays in your body: half life of 9 to 16 hours, Xanax clears from the system after 4 days

How can it be taken: usually swallowed

What it looks like: tablets in various sizes, shapes, and colours

Signs of use: slowed or slurred speech; potentially argumentative or aggressive; confusion; drowsiness

What does it do? - Xanax is a benzodiazepine. It is not prescribed by doctors in the UK. It gives you a floating sensation, as well as a warm, calm and relaxed feeling.

Risks - Xanax can make it difficult for you to breathe, give you short term memory loss, blackouts and reduced mental alertness and coordination. It can reduce anxiety to dangerously low levels - it makes you care less and this can result in risk-taking behaviour.

Taking Xanax can also have paradoxical effects, it can increase anxiety, give you seizures and can cause you to become more aggressive.

Xanax effects can last anywhere from 2 to 6 hours, the effect of the drug can wear off but will still be in your system. Taking more can lead to overdose and death.

Risk reduction

- Avoid mixing with other drugs or alcohol
- Sleep on your side to avoid choking in your sleep if you throw up taking the drug
- Avoid taking Xanax alone, make sure you have someone with you who can call an ambulance
- Only use a small amount of the drug, especially if using for the first time

Xanax is not available in the UK, therefore you must be extremely careful if you buy Xanax online as you do not know what you are buying.

You can overdose on Xanax - full information on overdose signs and symptoms are found on page 16-17

PRESCRIPTION AND OVER THE COUNTER DRUGS



What prescription drugs can a person become addicted to?

- opiates - often prescribed to treat pain e.g. codeine medications like co-codemol
- central nervous system depressants to treat anxiety and sleep disorders e.g. diazepam
- antidepressants e.g. citalopram and mirtazapine
- antihistamines e.g. chlorphenamine
- stimulants to treat ADHD such as dexamphetamine

When does it become addiction?

If you become physically and/or psychologically dependent, although not all drugs are capable of inducing a physical dependency.

Dependency is a feeling of not being able to do without a drug and a desperate need to get the drug and take to alleviate feelings that come from not having it.

What are the signs to look for in yourself and in others?

- Needing to take more of the drug to get an appropriate effect
- Asking your doctor for repeat prescriptions early
- Difficulty in trying to cut down or stopping drug use
- Feeling guilty about using the drugs
- Problems with work, finance or legal issues
- Being secretive about using the drugs
- Arguments or disagreements with family and friends about the drugs
- Taking other medications to alleviate side effects of the prescription drugs
- Experiencing withdrawal symptoms when stopping/reducing the drug or between doses

What are the dangers of prescription drugs?

There are many dangers and they all depend on the type and dose of the drug.

- Sedation - usually associated with short term use of a drug
- Lack of coordination - usually short term
- Altered state of consciousness - usually short term

- Gastrointestinal complaints, such as nausea (short term) and diarrhoea (short term) and constipation (long term)
- Depressed respiration
- Changes in blood pressure or heart rate - short and long term
- Changes in appetite - usually short term
- Tolerance and dependence of drug - long term
- Symptoms associated with withdrawal - longer term (different with each drug) these may include anxiety, depression, seizures, tremors and insomnia

What to do when you have recognised a problem:

In yourself

- Let friends, family or someone you trust know that you have a problem
- Don't delay and be honest about everything
- Tell your GP as soon as you can
- Ask your GP to help you find right support
- Go to an appropriate treatment programme

In someone else

- Offer support and offer to find help for them - contact our helpline 08080101011 or helpline@sfad.org.uk
- Be honest in a caring way
- Offer ongoing support

Over the Counter Drugs

What over the counter drugs can people become addicted to?

These are mainly codeine based analgesics such as:

- Ibuprofen and Codeine (Nurofen Plus)
- Paracetemol and Codeine (Solpadine)
- Some cough medicines also contain codeine (Benylin)

When do you classify usage as addiction?

Codeine, if taken regularly over a period of time can produce a physical dependence that will result in withdrawal symptoms when you stop taking it. It is possible to create a psychological dependence, e.g. when the drug is seen as a coping strategy to lower anxiety. A characteristic of addiction is that the awareness of the excessive and continued use actually increases anxiety.

What are the signs to look out for in yourself or others?

The most common signs are taking more than the recommended dose and using the drug without symptoms of actually needing to take it present.

What are the dangers of over the counter drugs?

Potential damage to the digestive system, liver and kidneys. You can take an overdose from over the counter drugs.

What to do when you have recognised a problem:

Talk about it - to your family or your friends and get help from a doctor.

COME UPS & COME DOWNS

Come ups relates to when drugs start to take effect whilst come downs are like a drug hangover, when the effects wear off.

Coming up safely

- Tell your friends what and how much you are taking
- Don't disappear by yourself, stay with people you know
- Know where you are e.g. find the bathroom and exit of a club and arrange a place to meet your friends
- Have a bottle of water with you
- Make sure your phone is charged before you go out
- Make sure you have cash for a taxi or a lift home
- Never leave a friend alone
- Try to have someone sober with you
- You may experience nausea and/or sickness

Come down essentials

- Time to recover
- Friends
- A safe environment
- Water
- Orange juice for vitamin C
- Bed - to sleep

A come down is like a hangover from drugs, and it's a stage you must go through when the effects of the drug begin to wear off. You can feel very different depending on what drug you're coming down from.

- When your comedown begins, don't take more drugs as this will worsen the effect
- When the comedown kicks in, you may feel irritable, tired and restless
- You may also have stomach upset, muscle pains and headaches
- Try to get a natural good sleep. If you struggle don't take sleeping tablets, do something to relax. You may feel irritable and down but this effect will wear off.
- You may experience mood swings over a few days or the feeling that you are getting worse. If you do, do something you enjoy or relax with friends.

OVERDOSE

Taking too much of a drug can cause overdose and the person will need immediate help. There are different signs and symptoms of overdose for different types of drug.

If you cannot get a response from someone, do not assume they are asleep. Unusual or deep snoring is a common sign of overdose. Taking action as soon as possible can save a life.

Do not walk them around, do not give them anything to eat or drink to try and make them sick, do not put them in a cold bath, do not give them any more drugs or alcohol and do not leave them alone. If you cannot get a response or if the person is unconscious always put them into the recovery position.

Signs

Opioid (Heroin, Methadone, etc.) overdose:

- No response to talking, shaking, noises
- Shallow breathing or not breathing at all
- The person will not wake up
- Unusual snoring/gurgling noises
- Blue/grey lips and/or finger tips
- Floppy arms and legs

Response

- Call an ambulance
- Take care of yourself - watch out for needles
- Try to get a response from the person
- If there is no response, put them in the recovery position
- If not breathing give CPR
- Administer Naloxone if you have it
- Tell the paramedics as much information as possible - what drug was taken, when it was taken, and how much was taken if you know

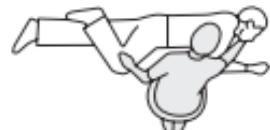
Even if the person wakes up, always make sure an ambulance is called.

The Recovery Position

Support face Place the arm nearest to you at right angles to the body. Place their other hand against their cheek.



Lift Leg Get hold of the far leg just above the knee and pull it up, keeping the foot flat on the ground.



Roll over Keep their hand pressed against their cheek and pull on the upper leg to roll them towards you and onto their side.



Taken from International Overdose Awareness Materials

Depressants (Benzodiazepines, Xanax, etc) overdose:

- Vomiting
- Unresponsive but awake
- Limp body
- Pale/clammy face
- Blue fingernails and/or lips
- Shallow or erratic breathing or not breathing at all
- Slow or erratic pulse
- Choking or sounds of a gurgling noise
- Loss of consciousness

Response

- Call an ambulance
- If not breathing before ambulance arrives, give CPR
- Make sure the person is getting air - open windows, tilt their head back, loosen any tight clothing
- If unconscious or the person wants to lie down, put them into the recovery position
- Tell the paramedics as much information as possible - what drug was taken, when it was taken, and how much was taken if you know

Even if the person wakes up, always make sure an ambulance is called. **Do not walk the person around, give them anything to eat or drink to try and make them sick, do not put them in a cold bath, do not give them any more drugs or alcohol and do not leave them alone.**

Stimulant (Cocaine, Ecstasy, Ketamine, etc) overdose:

- Hot, flushed or sweaty skin
- Person has a headache and/or chest pain
- Person is unsteady on their feet
- Rigid muscles, tremors or spasms
- Uncontrolled movements or seizures
- Difficulty breathing
- Person may experience psychotic symptoms with no previous issues
- Severe agitation or panic
- Alerted mental state such as confusion or disorientation

Response

- Call an ambulance
- Take the person to a quiet safe room away from too much light, heat, etc.
- If the person is confused or panicking try to reassure them
- If they are overheating, try and cool them down by loosening tight clothing and putting a wet towel on the back of their neck or under their arms
- If there is no response or they are unconscious put them into the recovery position
- If muscle spasms or seizures happen make sure there is nothing in the area that could cause injury
- Tell the paramedics as much information as possible - what drug was taken, when it was taken, and how much was taken if you know

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Most of this information was sourced from Crew2000 and Talk to Frank

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