

Betel Nut

Terms: **Areca Palm** (*areca catechu*), betel nut, catechu, katha
 Betel Creeper (*Piper Betle*), betel leaf

About Betel nut and Betel leaf:

The Areca palm is a tall palm, which produces seed pods. These seed pods are cropped and used as a stimulant. These are variously called Areca, Catechu or betel nuts. The Betel creeper is a slim vine with dark green, glossy, heart-shaped leaves. These are grown as a crop for their leaves and are often used alongside betel nuts.

The Hindi word for betel is *paan* and this term is also used for the preparation of leaf and nut widespread across India.

Increasingly popular, preparations of betel nut are also chewed with tobacco, both in India and elsewhere. These colourfully-wrapped packages are sold from numerous shops and stalls and has increasingly replaced traditional betel stalls. This 'smokeless tobacco' is called Gutkha in India and is known as Mawa and other names elsewhere. Repeated allegations are made that the products, with their packaging, sweet flavourings and images, are targeted at young users, and some Indian states have restricted their sale.

Appearance:

Betel nuts are hard, brown seeds; whole seeds are about the size of a walnut. Leaves from the betel vine are glossy green, heart-shaped leaves. Prepared paan will take the form of a mixture of spices, betel nut and lime in a folded leaf.

Methods of Use

Betel nut is chewed, on its own, with herbs and spices, or with tobacco. Generally some sort of lime is added as this makes the active compounds far more effective. Without the use of lime, betel can still be chewed for its taste and mouth freshening properties but will have a less marked stimulant effect.

Effects:

The active compounds in betel nut act as a mild stimulant. The effects include increased alertness, greater energy, reduced fatigue, talkativeness and excitability. Some users also report euphoric feelings.

Side effects include perspiration and increased salivation. Betel chewing tends to stain lips and teeth reddish-black.

After the effects of the drug have worn off, users are liable to feel tired and experience low mood, especially if use has been prolonged or extensive.

Risks

Betel use has a number of health benefits attributed to it; it is reputed to assist digestion, reduce flatulence and freshen the breath. However there is growing recognition internationally that betel use can have a damaging effect on health.

Research has suggested a high correlation between betel nut chewing and oral cancers and the risk is increased when betel is chewed alongside tobacco.¹ Other problems related to chewing include damage to teeth and gums and cavities. Betel use causes distinctive staining to lips and teeth, and the combined use with tobacco can cause unsightly brown staining to teeth.

Use of betel nut can lead to dependence, with similar symptoms to stimulant comedown – depression, feeling tired, restlessness and mood swings.

Availability In the UK:

100g of Betel Nut can be purchased from on-line sellers for around £2. It is not illegal to possess and supply and is widely available from shops serving Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities. Both whole nuts and prepared paan can be purchased. Packaged betel/tobacco is sold in the UK and is lawful provided that they are not sold to under 16s and they bear statutory warnings related to tobacco products.

Use in the UK:

Betel is legal in the UK, and is widely used amongst populations from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other countries where betel use is indigenous. There has been little research in to extent or problems relating to betel use in the UK.

¹ Areca nut use: an independent risk factor for oral cancer : <http://bmj.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/324/7341/799>