

# 'I prayed to God not to let my heart explode'



## MY TERRIFYING HEAD SHOP EXPERIENCE

**A 21-year-old Athlone man has spoken to the Roscommon People about his terrifying experience after he consumed 'Smoke' in a head shop in Galway. He contacted members of the Roscommon Anti-Head Shop committee last month, offering his support – and this harrowing insight into the possible effects of usage of some of the products available in head shops throughout Ireland....**

I am 21 years of age and from Athlone. Three years ago, in November of 2007, I was 18 and attending College in Galway. I had finished my Leaving Certificate a few months earlier and had not done as well I could have, due to some problems in my personal life, problems which followed me to Galway.

I was trying to make the best of a bad situation until the problems came to a head. In the preceding weeks I had experimented with a head shop brand named 'Smoke.' I was first introduced to it by the girl who was of course the source of all my weakness. I had tried marijuana before, socially, but always thought that it was totally pointless. This Smoke was different.

From the first inhalation I could feel it flow through my body like a tidal wave, a shiver from head to toe. I couldn't believe what I was feeling. It was a mixed experience – there was a slight fear, in that I'd never felt anything like it before and at one point I actually thought my guitar was about to attack me; a slight state of paranoia to say the least. But afterwards I decided that I would try it again, if only for the sense of total oblivion and the worry-free mind I believed it could give me. So I went to a head shop in

the city to purchase some for myself, which cost me the princely sum of €40 for a small container barely bigger than a tub of lip-balm.

As I mentioned, a week or two later the problems in my life came to a head. I should of course have found a better way to deal with the sadness, but instead I turned to Smoke, and I consumed a good deal more than I had done before in one sitting. What followed that night was an episode that changed my life, changed everything I am.

Heart palpitations took over so I retired to my bedroom (I was home alone). I listened to some music, lying on my bed to try and surrender to calm. But after a few short moments my heart-beat was booming in my ear even over the noise of the speakers. I jumped to my feet in a panic I'd never believed possible. My first instinct was to grab my phone and call an ambulance, but I didn't want to face the consequences of that. Instead, I prayed. I actually got down on my knees and prayed aloud to God not to let my heart explode right there and then. It became too much and I called 999.

After eventually getting past the operator (in my hysteria, I couldn't remember what county I was in), I spoke to a receptionist in Galway University College Hospital. At this stage I was screaming with fear and could barely get my point across. I told her where I was and that I was about to have a heart attack. I swore blindly that I was. She asked me what I had taken, and in my paranoia and my longing for safety I was afraid that she would laugh and hang up if I said that I'd taken a legal drug, so I said 'heroin.' Naturally she didn't believe me, and pressed me for a straight answer. I was just in dire need of an ambulance – in my mind I was about to drop dead at any second. I finally conceded and said 'I took this stuff called Smoke.' Immediately she said an ambulance was on the way and hung up.

I can't possibly describe what I felt that night. Within moments of being slightly relieved that medical attention was coming my way, I was panicking

because I didn't want anyone to find out. So as quickly as I could (without running, for fear of killing myself) I left my housing estate, walking past my ambulance on the way. I thought if I just walked and walked I would get back to normal. But after a few minutes I was terrified that I'd given my number to the lady in the hospital and that they would track me down. So I took my sim card out of my phone and actually started chewing it, thinking I could somehow erase the data. I finally came to my senses, reinserted the card and phoned my mum. I told her everything that had happened and she called the hospital and asked them to call me to find my whereabouts. I had absolutely no idea where I was when the lady rang, so all I could do was describe my surroundings. After a few minutes I was sitting in the back of the ambulance, feeling calmer than I had been for the last hour, yet still a totally different person, still a nervous wreck, still convinced my heart was about to give up, a fear which wasn't abated by them hooking me up to a heart monitor where I saw my heart rate at 195 BMP.

When I got to A&E I was disconsolate. Everyone around me seemed to hate me, the nurses judging me, the random drunken students in the waiting area laughing at me. After admission I was given a sedative and hooked up to another heart monitor, and I couldn't help but shout for assistance whenever it made a beep that I didn't like. I was so terribly alone and petrified. My parents arrived some time later after setting a record time from Athlone to Galway. By now, whatever sedative they gave me had taken effect and I was feeling somewhat better, my heart rate gradually decreasing, but even in what I felt was a relative calm in comparison to earlier it was still going at 140 BMP.

I was so, so ashamed of the worry I had caused, my father's ashen face enough to make me wish the ground would open up for me. The nurse took blood to check for toxins, but not before asking me if I had taken anything else, anything illegal. I think she was

surprised to find that I was telling the truth when I said I hadn't, but she did say they had seen similar cases caused by head shop products before. She said that because they didn't know what was in them, they had no idea whether there would be any long-term damage. I think she said this just to scare me perhaps, to make a point, but that sentence has stuck with me ever since. I still live in fear of the damage I caused to myself that no-one knows about.

I dropped out of College after that. I suffered from some pretty bad panic attacks for the next few months, still fearing the beating of my own heart. I went to the doctors numerous times under the guise of a check-up, asking them to check my heart with an ECG. After the summer I went to College again, but the panic attacks were getting worse, and they, allied with the new problem in my personal life (yes, another girl!) drove me to heavy, heavy drinking. It got to the point where I couldn't sleep without alcohol, literally couldn't, I was too scared when I was sober, constantly imagining pains in my chest so intense that I made a fool of myself in front of so many people so many times. So I would drink it away but then the next day I would have a demonic hangover and be a nervous wreck again. I was drinking anywhere between one and four low-budget 3-litre bottles of Tesco Dry Cider every day, not eating – and stealing any unattended drinks I could find in the pubs.

Every morning after, I would wake up to bombs going off in my mind and hallucinations, talking to people that weren't even there. I was popping painkillers like sweets when I was too sick to drink, just doing anything to calm myself down. My friends understood my hangovers and could see that I wasn't capable of anything strenuous – each and every hangover was just like that first night, the panic, the fear of death, the feeling that I was always just one beat away from a heart attack.

When my parents found out about everything again they brought me home to try to get me back together, paid for

sessions with a hypnotist (because of my drinking, all the hard sessions were undone that night), cut me down on my drinking but witnessed how little I could cope without it.

I struggled through the next months, until the summer holidays. I had a minor epiphany over the holidays months and I gave up drinking, and haven't drank in close enough to a year now. But I am still by no means my old self. I have christened myself a cardiophobic, because I think that is what I have become – I am terrified of my own heart, its limitations, its intricacies, and the damage I may have caused to it. I am terribly unfit and can't exert myself.

I played gaelic all my life, right up to the Smoke that broke the camel's back. I loved football but haven't be able to play it since for fear of death. I miss it and my old carefree self, so much. I would give anything not to spend the rest of my life living in fear, because this is no way to live, but I cannot see any other way. I don't believe there is help, that anyone can change my mindset so dramatically. I don't believe that anything could ever alter everything about someone the way Smoke altered everything about me that night. I know I will never be the same but to some extent I have learnt to ignore the fear, without testing it. And all I can do is hope in vain. And of course, hope that no-one else, anywhere, any time, ever has to go through anything like this ever again.

I would like to offer my support to those campaigning against head shops in Roscommon and elsewhere. Although I don't believe that anything can be done in the short-term to combat a drug culture that exists all over the world, I do think that this situation, the buying and selling of unknown, untested cocktails under a veil of legality, can and must change.

I do hope that my name won't be attached to this article as I couldn't bear to bring any further embarrassment to my family. But I just hope that it can be passed on to someone in power so that the worst thing that ever happened to me could actually do some good.