

Dabs—marijuana's explosive secret

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Two months into [Colorado's](#) great marijuana experiment, a single trend may be poised to tarnish the "natural and healthy" image of legal weed: hash oil concentrate. [Washington](#), the next state to roll out legal recreational marijuana, has banned it. Colorado is trying to regulate it. Hash oil concentrate, a powerful distillation of marijuana's essential active ingredients, is mixed into many new and popular cannabis products: edibles, drinks and liquids that can be "smoked" in vaporizer pens like e-cigarettes. The problem-child of concentrates may turn out to be the actual concentrate itself—a hardened or viscous mass of cannabinoids created via a process of butane-gas extraction. Making it can be explosive. In fact, all over the country, people have been exploding kitchens and basements trying to make their own butane hash oil. And smoking it—a new craze called "dabbing," because a little dab'll do ya—is giving an intense high miles beyond the mellow effects of a joint. Hash oil concentrate isn't new, but the current version is. The recent incarnation appeared on the scene only about four years ago, according to [marijuana.com](#). Concentrate is an extremely potent form of THC, the psychoactive element in marijuana. According to Brian Ruden, owner of Starbuds, a marijuana dispensary in Denver, while regular marijuana might contain 15 or 18 percent THC, hash oil concentrate gets closer to 80 or even 90 percent. The high that a user gets from concentrates is far from natural, and the method by which hash oil is made sounds anything but healthy. Marijuana trim (or sometimes bud) is infused with a hydrocarbon, usually butane gas. The butane strips the THC and some other cannabinoids out of the plant when the mix is put under intense pressure. In addition to marijuana concentrate, the goopy stuff that emerges is laced with butane. This has to be cooked down to remove the residual chemical. The result (if the cook doesn't blow up; butane is explosive) is a glassy substance called "shatter" or "wax." In part, the bad press for concentrates may be a little unfair. People blowing up their kitchens trying to make butane hash oil at home doesn't mean hash oil itself is bad. Fires and explosions all over Colorado have alarmed lawmakers and the media alike. In Aurora, where marijuana sales are still illegal, there have been four butane hash oil explosions in the past four months, [the most recent](#) landing two young men in the hospital with burns after they blew out the windows of their apartment. According to Julie Postlethwait, spokeswoman for Colorado's Marijuana Enforcement Division, new safety [rules](#) for the manufacture of concentrates are slated to go into effect on March 2. They include ensuring an industrial hygienist or professional engineer approves manufacturing equipment, and having eyewash available on site. But, she said, they apply only to Colorado's commercial marijuana industry. "Individuals have the right to grow their own plants." Can they make their own concentrate? "Yes, legally," Postlethwait said. "It's up to local authorities, cities and towns and counties. They can prohibit the manufacture of concentrates. I don't know if they are." Local authorities may not know if they are, either. Many officials seem confused about the details of current marijuana law. According to Colorado's Municipal League's ["Election Results Retail Marijuana,"](#) only one town, Gunnison, specifically establishes "standards for home cultivation" and "personal processing." Other municipalities prohibit "marijuana product manufacturing facilities," but that could be interpreted as commercial production, leaving the door open for making concentrate privately. Localities can forbid as many of Amendment 64's rights as they want, and many have, at least for now. Aurora's moratorium on all cannabis enterprise will be in effect until May 5. "Manufacturing of hash oil," City Attorney George Zierk said, "is illegal in Aurora." According to Aurora police officer Frank Fania, at least one of the young men involved in Aurora's most recent hash oil explosion has been charged with a crime: reckless endangerment, but not hash oil manufacturing. Having gotten past the bad press created by stupendously unsophisticated people cooking dangerous concentrates in the kitchen, there's still the unhealthy, Breaking-Bad image of actually smoking the concentrates, called "dabbing." The whole problem may have something to do with blowtorches. To smoke dabs, you need concentrate ("shatter" or its softer cousin, "earwax"), a small, sturdy pick, a specially crafted bong and a blowtorch. You twirl a dab of the concentrate onto the pick, apply a blowtorch that looks like it belongs in an auto mechanic's shop to the bowl of the bong until it's glowing hot, then touch the dab to a nailhead inside the bowl. The dab vaporizes instantaneously and the user sucks up the smoke—almost pure THC.

"Dabs have become a culture unto themselves," said Harrison Garcia, a salesman at Denver's Green Solution dispensary and blogger for Weedist.com. "There are serious 'dab people' who only dab and do not even smoke flower because it's just not strong enough for them." Despite the media interest and hype, dabbers still seem to be a small minority of users. Elan Nelson, head of business strategy and development for Medicine Man, a large Denver dispensary, says about only 10 percent of their sales goes to dabbing concentrates. "You have to have a very high THC tolerance," Nelson said. "We're not really recommending it." Starbuds' Ruden concurs. Dabbing concentrates aren't a big portion of his sales. "Although we sell a lot of concentrate, we sell much more flower and edibles," Ruden said via email. "One limiting factor is the concentrate supply, we keep running out." A more enthusiastic Austin Gilliam, general manager of Kine Mine, an Idaho Springs, Color., dispensary, puts it this way: "It's flying off the shelves. We have it back-ordered from the manufacturer now. It's a trend. It seems to be very popular with the young people." Popularity with the young people is just what Steve Millette, executive director of CeDAR, the University of Colorado Hospital's residential rehab, worries about. The younger a person begins to indulge, the more likely he or she will become addicted, Millette said, adding that concentrates are "like going from a glass of beer to a glass of whisky." "Addiction isn't the only problem. There's also mental illness," he said. Millette, who thinks legalization was a mistake, sees marijuana leading to "a motivational syndrome," a condition in which a person becomes apathetic and loses the interest and the will to do much of anything. And since young adults are at a particularly vulnerable age when it comes to psychosis, Millette feels the popularity of marijuana concentrates poses a particular danger to them. "If there's already a predisposition [to mental illness], putting a concentrated toxic substance into the brain can be dangerous." "Marijuana," he said, "is not harmless. It is not safe." The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration recently moved to create a new drug code for marijuana extracts. They want to track it as a separate entity. "It's not for beginners," Medicine Man's Nelson said.