

Increase in ecstasy among Australia's recreational drug users; synthetic drugs tighten their grip; users risking "no name" capsules

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Ecstasy among Australia's regular drug users, in pubs, clubs and music festivals, appears to be making a comeback, according to research to be released today by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of New South Wales.

As well there has been an increase in the number of ecstasy users also taking synthetic drugs - with 40 per cent of the sample using emerging psychoactive drugs including synthetic cannabis.

Investigators have also warned of a new trend of users consuming capsules of "unknown content", without a name.

The research from the Centre's annual Drug Trends reporting team examined trends in drug use among a sample of 600 regular ecstasy users over a six month period this year.

Significantly the decline in perceived purity of ecstasy which is believed to have been behind falls in use in the past two years, appears to have halted, with only 27 per cent of the national sample reporting low purity compared with nearly half in 2011. Close to 90 per cent of the sample described the drug as easy or very easy to obtain and the proportion who found the drug difficult to get hold of halved compared with 2011.

The changes in purity and availability of ecstasy have been most profound in NSW where less than a fifth of users reported low purity compared with 53 per cent of users in 2011. In Victoria around a quarter of users described the drug to be of low purity compared with nearly half (46%) in 2011.

The Australian findings mirror a comeback in ecstasy availability which has been reported around the globe in this year's UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) World Drug Report. The World Drug Report 2012 found that "ecstasy" group seizures had doubled in Europe over the reporting period. Similar increases have been reported in the US and in South East Asia.

Drug Trends' Chief Investigator and NDARC Senior Lecturer Dr Lucy Burns said while there were some positive findings in this year's report there were some worrying trends which need to be monitored closely.

"The number and range of synthetic drugs which are being accessed by regular ecstasy users is cause for concern," says Dr Burns.



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“What is concerning about synthetic drugs is that there is great variability in the content of these substances, and often, very little is known about what they actually contain,” says Dr Burns.

“This poses unknown risks for consumers particularly as the vast majority of ecstasy users are polydrug users and are taking more than one drug at a time.”

Another concerning trend is that 12 per cent of ecstasy users reported taking capsules of “unknown content” without a name, she says.

“Not only do they not know the content of the drug they are taking there is a great deal of uncertainty as to how they react with other substances including ecstasy, cannabis and alcohol all of which are consumed heavily by this group of users.”

Around 40 per cent of users binge while on ecstasy and other drugs – that is using a drug on a continuous basis for more than 48 hours without sleep.

“This is also cause for concern,” said Dr Burns. “Bingeing is associated with a number of very risky behaviours, unsafe sex, atypical drug use (for this sample) such as injecting and sharing needles, and driving under the influence.”

Other key findings:

- Alcohol, tobacco and cannabis are the most commonly recently used drugs among this sample
- 96 per cent of the sample reported recent use of alcohol, followed by 83 per cent using tobacco, and 82 per cent using cannabis
- The proportion of daily cannabis smokers increased (24% in 2012 vs. 18% in 2011)
- Ecstasy is most commonly taken in tablet form but there has been an increasing trend in the use of powder and the capsule form and more recently MDMA crystals or Ecstasy Rock
- Ecstasy costs on average \$25 per pill (with a range of \$5 - \$60)
- Recent use of methamphetamine remained stable, with increased reports of difficulty obtaining ‘speed’ powder
- Cocaine use decreased, but more users reported the purity of cocaine as ‘high’
- Use of the hallucinogen LSD has significantly decreased in 2012 (34% in 2012 vs. 46% in 2011) while ketamine and GHB use remained stable
- Emerging psychoactive substances (EPS) continue to grow as a class of drug used by the sample including a significant increase in synthetic cannabinoids (15% of users in 2012 vs. 6% in 2011)
- 16 per cent of the sample reported ever injecting drugs
- Of those who had injected nearly a third injected ice
- A third of the sample reported overdosing on stimulants over their lifetime and just over half of these reported overdosing on ecstasy

- 40 per cent of the sample reported having between two and five casual sexual partners over the previous six months and 92 per cent had penetrative sex with a casual partner while on drugs.

For more information and more detailed findings from each state and territory, please see the attachment *Key findings from the 2012 EDRS*. You can also view our [ecstasy fact sheet](#).

What: 2012 National Drugs Trends Conference.
When: Tuesday 9 October 2012, 8.45 am – 5.00pm
Where: The Australian National Maritime Museum
2 Murray Street Darling Harbour Sydney NSW 2000

About the Ecstasy and Related Drug Reporting System (EDRS)

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) monitors the price, purity, availability and patterns of use of illicit drugs such as ecstasy, methamphetamine, cocaine, ketamine, GHB and LSD among people who regularly use ecstasy.

The term “ecstasy and related drugs” (ERD) includes drugs that are routinely used in the context of entertainment venues and other recreational locations including nightclubs, dance parties, pubs and music festivals. ERD includes ecstasy, methamphetamine, cocaine, LSD, MDA, GHB and emerging psychoactive substances (EPS).

These surveys of drug users are designed to provide early warnings of trends. The results of the EDRS are **NOT** representative of drug use among the general population, nor are they intended to be. The results are intended to indicate emerging trends to assist policy makers, law enforcers and clinicians.

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

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