

Engagement in drug checking ('pill testing') and behavioural responses by people who regularly use drugs in New South Wales

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The issue

Illicit drug markets are unregulated, and there is growing research highlighting the willingness of people who use drugs to obtain information about substance contents^[1-2]. Personal testing kits (i.e., reagent tests) comprise the only local option for people in New South Wales (NSW) to obtain objective information about illicit drugs. Previous research has reported findings on drug checking experiences among people who use ecstasy in 2005 and more recently^[1,3], but have not reported findings specifically for participants from NSW. Such findings are pertinent given recent discussion around drug checking services in NSW.

What our work found

For the [Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System \(EDRS\)](#) and the [Illicit Drug Reporting System \(IDRS\)](#), face-to-face interviews (including items on drug checking) were conducted with people who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants (EDRS; N=100) and people who regularly inject drugs (IDRS; N=149) recruited in Sydney, NSW in April-July and May-July 2019, respectively.

- Four in ten EDRS participants (43%) and one in ten IDRS participants (11%) had ever tested their drugs.
- One in three EDRS participants (32%) and 7% of IDRS participants had tested their drugs in the last year.
- Most participants who had tested their drugs in the last year had used a personal testing kit last time.

Drug checking experience among people who regularly use illicit drugs in Sydney, NSW	EDRS % (n)	IDRS % (n)
Experience of drug checking in the total sample:	N=100	N=149
No	57% (57)	89% (133)
Yes, but not in the past year	11% (11)	4% (6)
Yes, in the past year	32% (32)	7% (11)
Type of test used last time among those who had tested drugs in the past year:	N=32	N=11
Personal testing kit or strip (e.g., colorimetric/reagent test or immunoassay strip)	88% (28)	55% (6)
Face-to-face testing service (e.g., festival pill-testing service)	0	-
Postal/online testing service	0	-
Other/Don't know/Refused to answer	-	0

Use of personal testing kits among EDRS participants:

- Of those who had last used a personal testing kit (n=27), 48% (n=13) used the test within 24 hours of drug use, and the remainder more than 24 hours before use.
- 57% (n=16) said someone else conducted testing and 43% (n=12) conducted testing themselves last time.
- Most (96%, n=26) had tested a substance they had purchased as 'ecstasy/ MDMA'.
- We asked 16 people who had last used a personal testing kit for 'ecstasy/ MDMA' whether the result indicated MDMA: all reported that ecstasy/MDMA was detected.
- All participants who tested and detected MDMA subsequently used the substance. A number reported results of tested drugs to peers/friends or on an online forum.

Implications

One-third of the sample who regularly used ecstasy had tested their illicit drugs in the last year; fewer people who injected drugs reported this behaviour. These findings support existing research in Australia showing that people who use illicit drugs want information about the contents of their drugs, and adds to the growing smaller literature about such interest amongst people who inject drugs^[1,2]. We are unable to comment on behaviour change in cases where MDMA was not detected as all respondents reported detection of the expected substance. As reagent tests typically only test for presence of a single substance, we also cannot draw inferences regarding behaviour when informed about the quantity or about the presence of other substances – information which may be provided by drug checking services alongside harm reduction information.

References:

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