

Drug checking ('pill testing') and behavioural responses among a sample of Australians who regularly use drugs

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The issue

People who use illicit drugs engage in harm reduction strategies based on perceived substance contents^[1]. With the exception of a drug checking service at a Canberra music festival^[2], personal testing kits (e.g., reagent tests) comprise the only local option for Australians who use illicit drugs to obtain objective information about these substances. Data collected in 2005 from people who used ecstasy showed that 22% had used testing kits on substances acquired as ecstasy^[1]. There has been no recent update of these data nor study of drug checking among Australians who inject drugs.

What our work found

For the [Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System \(EDRS\)](#) and the [Illicit Drug Reporting System \(IDRS\)](#), interviews were conducted with people who regularly use ecstasy and other illicit stimulants (EDRS; N=797) and people who regularly inject drugs (IDRS; N=902) recruited from Australian capital cities in April-July and May-July 2019, respectively. There were 792 EDRS participants and 883 IDRS participants who responded to items on drug checking, showing:

- More than four in ten EDRS participants (45%) and one in ten IDRS participants (11%) had ever tested their drugs.
- One in three EDRS participants (36%) and one in twenty IDRS participants (6%) had tested their drugs in the last year.
- Most EDRS and IDRS 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	EDRS % (n)	IDRS % (n)
Experience of drug checking in the total sample:	N=792	N=883
No	55% (435)	89% (784)
Yes, but not in the past year	9% (73)	6% (50)
Yes, in the past year	36% (284)	6% (49)
Type of test used last time among those who had tested drugs in the past year:	N=284	N=49
Personal testing kit or strip (e.g., colorimetric/reagent test or immunoassay strip)	87% (248)	71% (35)
Face-to-face testing service (e.g., festival pill-testing service)	4% (11)	4% (2)
Postal/online testing service	1% (3)	2% (1)
Other/Don't know/Refused to answer	8% (22)	22% (11)

- Of EDRS participants who had last used a personal testing kit (n=248), most (84%, n=208) had tested a substance they had purchased as 'ecstasy/ MDMA'.
- We asked 153 of these people who had last used a personal testing kit for 'ecstasy/ MDMA' whether the result indicated MDMA: 88% (n=134) said MDMA was detected, 8% (n=13) said no MDMA was detected, and 4% (n=6) said 'don't know'.

EDRS participants who tested ecstasy/MDMA with a personal testing kit and asked about what they did in response:	Not detected [^] % (n)	Detected % (n)
	N=13	N=134
Used the tested drug	46% (6)	95% (127)
Did not use the tested drug	31% (4)	3% (4)
Reported results of tested drugs to peers/friends or on forums	54% (7)	31% (42)
Still have the drug and plan to use in the future	15% (2)	8% (11)

Note: Participants could endorse multiple responses (but could not endorse both 'used the tested drug' and 'did not use tested drug'). [^]Small numbers: treat with caution.

Implications

Nearly half of the sample who regularly used ecstasy and other illicit stimulants had tested their illicit drugs; fewer people who injected drugs reported this behaviour. Most people who had used a personal testing kit on a substance acquired as 'ecstasy/MDMA' identified MDMA and then used the substance. This finding reinforces previous research showing that people who use illicit drugs want information about the contents of their substance^[1,3]. However, these tests typically only identify the presence or absence of a drug: they do not identify all substances within the tested drug, nor the dose. This information is critical to inform behaviours to reduce harms from, for example, high-dose MDMA or from adulterants. Behaviour may differ with more sophisticated testing, and with parallel provision of harm reduction information (as provided with most drug checking services)^[5].

References:

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