

Where do people who use drugs in Australia find information about drugs online?

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Background

The digital mediation of information is becoming ever more popular. This includes use of online platforms for drug-related information. Study of information shared in online contexts can inform monitoring activities to identify emerging trends of concern. Such work needs to be informed by up-to-date data on what drug-related information people seek in the online environment and via which platforms.

Aims

- 1) To describe the type of drug-related information sought online by people in Australia who regularly use illicit drugs; and
- 2) To identify the digital platforms that are commonly accessed for drug-related information.

Methods

Data were obtained from two sentinel surveys conducted in 2023 of Australian residents in capital cities who:

- 1) reported using ecstasy or other stimulants ≥ 6 times in the past 6 months, recruited via social media and word of mouth (EDRS¹); or
- 2) reported injecting drugs ≥ 6 times in the past 6 months, recruited through treatment agencies, needle and syringe programs and word of mouth (IDRS²).

Participants were asked whether they accessed information about illicit drugs (including prescription medicines not prescribed to them) online in the last 12 months, the type of information they accessed, and what platforms they used for each information type.

Results

Approximately two in three EDRS (65%) and one in four IDRS (24%) respondents accessed online information about drugs (Table 1).

The most common type of information accessed was about effects of a drug (EDRS: 43%; IDRS: 12%), followed by how to safely use a drug (EDRS: 32%; IDRS: 6%) and potential contents of a drug (EDRS: 26%; IDRS: 9%).

Approximately six in ten respondents who accessed online information about drugs used Google (Table 2). Social media (60%) and messaging (35%) platforms were commonly used by EDRS respondents. Nearly one in five respondents who accessed online information used websites typically used for presenting information (e.g., YouTube, Wikipedia and Erowid).

Table 1. Access of online information about illicit and non-prescribed drugs

Whether accessed & type of info	EDRS (n=702)	IDRS (n=812)
No	35% (247)	76% (617)
Yes ^a	65% (455)	24% (195)
Effects of a drug	43% (305)	12% (100)
How to more safely use a drug	32% (227)	6% (51)
Potential contents of a drug	26% (186)	9% (77)
Sourcing a drug	11% (80)	2% (20)
Increase pleasure from using a drug	12% (82)	2% (15)
Other drug-related information	3% (22)	2% (17)

^a Column percentages do not add to 100% because a respondent can access >1 type of information.

Implications

- Provision of reliable harm reduction information via online platforms is critical given that many participants reported accessing online drug-related information, predominantly to find out about effects of a drug, how to more safely use a drug, and potential contents of a drug.
- Dominance of Google as an information source suggests search engine optimisation and other strategies could be used to ensure reliable, evidence-based harm reduction information is prioritised.
- Overall, findings suggest that monitoring of primary online platforms used to access drug-related information may provide critical insights on contemporary drug information needs and trends.

References

1. Sutherland, R. et al. (2023). Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) Interviews 2023: Background and Methods. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.
2. Sutherland, R. et al. (2023) Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) Interviews 2023: Background and Methods. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.

Table 2. Online platforms most commonly used by respondents who accessed online information about illicit & non-prescribed drugs

Most commonly used platforms ^a	EDRS (n=455)	IDRS(n=195)
Google	62% (284)	59% (116)
Social media platforms	60% (274)	13% (26)
Reddit	30% (137)	6% (12)
Instagram	19% (85)	2% (3)
Snapchat	15% (69)	2% (3)
Facebook	13% (57)	3% (5)
Messaging platforms	35% (159)	5% (10)
Facebook Messenger	24% (108)	3% (6)
Information presenting platforms	18% (84)	19% (37)
YouTube	8% (36)	8% (16)
Wikipedia	5% (25)	9% (17)
Erowid	5% (24)	9% (18)

^a Respondents were given a list of 26 commonly used platforms; this is a selected list of most commonly used platforms. Column percentages do not add to 100%.

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