

How do you look after someone who has taken ecstasy?

When things go wrong after taking ecstasy it is always best to seek medical help as quickly as possible. Even though ecstasy deaths are rare, they do happen and when they do they can happen quickly.

Helping someone who is drug-affected can be difficult and potentially dangerous. Often, the person may be aggressive and un-cooperative. While it is important to try to keep your friend safe, the first priority must always be your personal safety. Never be afraid to pass the problem over to someone else, particularly if they become violent. If in doubt, always call 000.

ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU ARE A FRIEND, NOT A DOCTOR.

There are a number of key warning signs to indicate that someone who has taken ecstasy could be in real danger. If you see any of these, call 000 immediately.

- **Very high body temperature**
- **Profuse sweating**
- **Muscle cramps**
- **Seizures**

- **Unable to cool down and fast pulse rate and heartbeat when resting**
- **Confusion and being unable to answer simple questions**

If someone you know has taken ecstasy and is feeling unwell, here are a few things you can do to look after them and keep them as safe as possible:

- **Stay with them and never leave them alone**
- **Change the environment**
- **Monitor them**
- **Reassure them**
- **Keep them hydrated – ‘sip don’t gulp’**
- **If in doubt, call 000**

Be aware that the police do not routinely attend an ambulance call, even if there are illegal drugs involved. The only reason the police will usually attend is if the paramedics ask them to be there. This is usually due to another crime taking place or the threat of violence.

Ecstasy is an illegal drug and if you are found with it in your possession you could face fines and/or a prison sentence, as well as a possible criminal record.

What is ecstasy?

Ecstasy is an illegal drug and is the street term for the chemical Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). It is structurally similar to methamphetamine or ‘speed’ and has both stimulant and hallucinogenic effects. It is usually sold as a pill or tablet, a capsule or in powder form. Although MDMA is the substance people are after when they use the drug, the content of ecstasy varies greatly and there is no reliable method of determining what it is they are actually taking.

What are the major dangers associated with ecstasy?

Ecstasy deaths are rare but they do happen. They are usually caused by overheating, drinking too

much fluid or heart failure. They can also be due to an individual’s response to the substance that is in the pill, tablet or powder – whether that be MDMA or some other substance. Although ecstasy deaths are not the norm, many people get sick after taking a pill and seek help from friends, as well as medical professionals.

MDMA affects the regulation of body temperature, as well as interferes with the body receiving warning signs about overheating. As a result the body can reach extreme temperatures (41-42°C) leading to problems that even medical professionals are not easily able to deal with, including unstoppable bleeding, liver and kidney failure and ultimately death. Overheating can also lead to major problems with dehydration, particularly when mixed with other drugs, particularly alcohol.

Medical Disclaimer

The information provided on this fact sheet is provided for information purposes only. As such it **cannot substitute for the advice of a medical professional**

How do you look after someone who has taken ecstasy?

Ecstasy use can also affect the kidneys and prevent the body from getting rid of fluids. This causes a sodium imbalance and results in the organs swelling, particularly the brain. It becomes compressed, putting pressure on the brain stem that controls heart and breathing functions. This is called 'water intoxication' and can lead to coma and death.

Some substances have been found in ecstasy that are particularly dangerous (e.g., PMA, an extremely toxic form of amphetamine) and this can make it extremely difficult to treat someone if they become unwell as medical staff cannot be certain as to what they have actually taken. Even if the pill actually does contain the drug users are after (i.e., MDMA), that does not mean that it is safe as there have been deaths caused by an MDMA overdose.

Some ecstasy users may experience panic attacks after taking the drug. These can be very frightening for the person experiencing them – often there is a belief that they will die or lose total control. Although panic attacks can be alarming, they're relatively harmless and usually pass. The person often finds breathing difficult, laboured or far too fast and they may have difficulty swallowing. The user can be sweating or trembling. They may also complain of a headache, backache, chest pains or palpitations.

How do you know if something is really wrong?

There are a number of key warning signs to indicate that someone who has taken ecstasy could be in real danger. If you see any of these, call 000 immediately.

- **Very high body temperature**
- **Profuse sweating**
- **Muscle cramps**
- **Seizures**
- **Unable to cool down and fast pulse rate and heartbeat when resting**
- **Confusion and being unable to answer simple questions**

The problem with many of these warning signs is that some of them, particularly high body temperature and sweating, are regarded by many ecstasy users as simply part of the experience. This makes ecstasy such a difficult drug to deal with, as

there is such a fine line between what may be seen as 'normal' negative effects and those that mean the user is in danger.

It is important to 'follow your heart' here – if it doesn't feel right, it usually isn't! If for any reason you think the situation is getting out of control and your friend is in trouble, don't hesitate, call 000.

Things to do if your friend is feeling unwell after taking ecstasy

Many ecstasy users can be overwhelmed by the experience and feel quite nauseous, particularly in the first hour after taking the drug. This is sometimes called the 'coming up' stage, with some people 'dry retching' or even vomiting during this time.

Never be worried about handing over a friend to a medical professional if you are concerned in any way about their health and well-being. If you feel, however, that you are able to deal with the situation at this stage, here are some simple things you can do to look after them to keep them as safe as possible:

- **Stay with them and never leave them alone** – it can be a very fine line between the 'normal' unpleasant experience and the person being in trouble and in urgent need of medical attention. They must not be left by themselves, not even for a second! It is also important for them to know that they are not alone, but at the same time, make sure that they have lots of space so they do not feel cramped in, particularly if they are feeling nauseous. Do not let them go to the toilet by themselves – if they want to go somewhere, insist you go with them and at the very least stay close, watch them and keep talking to them
- **Change the environment** – move them to a place where there is little stimulation, i.e., no loud music and no bright lights. They are going through an intense and often very frightening experience, you want to try to minimise any additional stimulation if you can
- **Monitor them** – it is vital they are watched carefully and any change in their condition be responded to as quickly as possible. If you have taken drugs yourself, hand your friend over to someone else – ecstasy is not a drug to be messed with – if you are not able to monitor the person to the best of your ability, don't take the risk!

How do you look after someone who has taken **ecstasy**?

- **Reassure them** – this can be a very scary experience and they need to be reassured that the experience will end in time and you will stay with them until they get better. They need to be told that they will be okay and they just need to ‘ride it out’ (this is often called ‘talking them down’) – this is important as you don’t want them to start to panic. If they are experiencing a panic attack and they are finding it difficult to breathe (it is rapid and irregular), get them to breathe more slowly by copying your breathing (in through the nose, out through the mouth)
- **Keep them hydrated – ‘sip don’t gulp’** – this is the really difficult one! Ecstasy users can get into major problems with not drinking enough (overheating and dehydration) as well as drinking too much (‘water intoxication’) and so the most important thing to remember is to replace lost fluids, i.e., if they are sweating and urinating, they need to drink, if they’re not, make sure they drink a lot less. Ecstasy makes you thirsty, your mouth becomes dry and you will want to drink – the key message you give to someone who is feeling unwell is ‘sip don’t gulp’. You want them to take small sips from a water bottle rather than gulping down a whole bottle
- **If in doubt, call 000** – when things go wrong after taking ecstasy, they usually go terribly wrong and you have little time to get the help you need. It is vital that you call for an ambulance as soon as you believe that your friend is in trouble and you can no longer look after them. There are no hard and fast rules here, ecstasy deaths are unpredictable, but calling 000 is always the best option if you are in any way unsure of what to do

Be aware that the police do not routinely attend an ambulance call, even if there are illegal drugs involved. The only reason the police will usually attend is if the paramedics ask them to be there. This would usually happen if they reported another crime taking place or they believed there was a threat of violence.