

Ecstasy | Pill Testing

PART 2

In the past, ecstasy-related deaths were often linked to environmental factors such as overheating or dehydration. Recently, however, an increasing number of deaths appear to be linked to a range of new and potentially more dangerous substances that are sold as MDMA or ecstasy, as well as ‘super strength’ pills containing three or more times an average adult dose. A strategy that has been put forward that may reduce the risk of these deaths is ‘pill testing’.

What is pill testing and is it available in Australia?

Pill testing or drug checking is the process of testing a substance to determine the type of drug or drugs, potency (strength) and adulterants (impurities or toxins). Pill testing programmes comprise different approaches and techniques. Some programmes are supported by national governments; others are tolerated by local agencies including the police. The key feature is that a member of the public can bring a substance of concern for testing and receive the test results directly and without police action against them. At present, there is no laboratory-based testing programme for the general public in Australia and there has been just one pilot scheme conducted at a dance festival in 2018 in the ACT.

Testing alone cannot remove all the danger associated with ecstasy and other drugs.

Emerging evidence suggests that if pill testing is made available its value lies in being part of a broad intervention that includes providing information and advice to individuals and communicating warnings about dangerous drugs to large audiences.

Health teachers need to consider the following points about ecstasy when conducting alcohol and other drug prevention activities in their classroom

- **Students are likely to ask questions about pill testing.**
- **The only way to ensure that a person comes to no harm from ecstasy use is for them not to take it. There are steps young people can take, however, to reduce the likelihood of harm.**
- **All young people, whether they choose to use ecstasy or not, need basic information on what to do in a drug-related emergency.**
- **Pill testing can provide an opportunity for young people to speak with healthcare staff about drug problems in a confidential and non-judgmental way, as well as to raise awareness of substances of concern in circulation.**

As such, teachers should consider raising the issue of ecstasy-related harm when delivering alcohol and other drug prevention messages.

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Background

Since 1985, Australia has adopted a ‘harm minimisation’ approach to alcohol and other drugs (AOD). This incorporates three distinct ‘pillars’, i.e., supply reduction, demand reduction and harm reduction. Harm reduction is the most controversial of these, acknowledging that some people are unable or not willing to stop their AOD use and, as such, focuses on the prevention of harm rather than the prevention of the drug use itself.

Although drug-related deaths at music festivals, nightclubs and other nightlife venues and events receive a great deal of media attention, they are not the norm and, are in fact, quite rare. When deaths

have occurred over the years there are usually calls for heavier policing, instead of looking at ways of potentially reducing the harm associated with drug use. This has resulted in the introduction of policing initiatives such as drug detection dogs and roadside (or mobile) drug testing (RDT or MDT).

It is also important to acknowledge that some of the deaths, particularly those that were ecstasy-related, that have occurred at these events were linked to environmental factors such as overheating or dehydration. In direct response to this, the NSW Government published guidelines that outlined simple strategies that could potentially reduce harm for those attending dance events by creating a safer physical environment. Some of the issues covered

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included water provision, organising security and first aid.

Recently, we have seen an increasing number of deaths at music festivals that do not appear to be related to environmental factors. Instead, one of the reasons put forward for these deaths is the increasing global availability of novel or new psychoactive substances (NPS), and the ease with which NPS may be misrepresented as better-known drugs, like ecstasy/MDMA. Adulteration is not the only risk though; a rise in 'super strength' ecstasy pills that contain three or more times an average adult dose of MDMA has been responsible for numerous deaths around the world. Therefore, health authorities have tried to identify ways to reduce the potential risk associated with their use and/or misuse. A strategy put forward as one that may minimise the risk of ecstasy-related deaths is 'pill testing'.

What is pill testing?

Pill testing or drug checking is the process of testing a substance to determine the type of drug or drugs, potency (strength) and adulterants (impurities or toxins).

The purpose of pill testing is to provide accurate information to users to reduce harm by preventing or modifying drug taking behaviour. This might involve face-to-face conversations with individuals or communication with larger audiences via news media and social media. Members of the public bring substances of concern for forensic testing either in a fixed site or pop-up lab and receive the test results in 'real time' along with a counselling or harm reduction advice session. It also provides information on general drug market trend monitoring as well as intelligence on particularly dangerous substances in circulation to inform national and international early warning systems.

Without specialist drug testing services, it is impossible for drug users to know what they are taking. Typically, users rely on word of mouth and recommendations based on indicators such as the colour of substances or logos on tablets. These methods are unreliable and potentially life threatening.

Pill testing programmes have been operating in some European countries for over 20 years. In recent years, drug checking in night-time settings

and outdoor festivals has received increased attention in Australia, the UK and North America. The emergence of new drugs, super strength ecstasy and increased drug-related deaths have been key factors in driving such interest.

This fact sheet focuses on pill testing in relation to substances used in nightlife or music festival settings. The term pill testing has been used throughout the fact sheet. However, drug checking is a more accurate term since drugs come in powders as well as pills and most drug checking services will check all pills and powders received.

What are the benefits of pill testing?

Advocates argue that pill testing is a pragmatic harm reduction approach that is credible with the target audience and has the potential to prevent acute illness and death. Some of the key benefits are as follows:

- To provide warnings and alerts of particularly dangerous substances.
- To engage and inform potential consumers of drugs and to provide counselling and signpost to other health services, if necessary.
- To provide individual users with information about the likely content of their drug, which can help them make informed decisions about their drug taking.
- To provide public health and law enforcement with intelligence about drug markets and emerging consumption trends, patterns of use and risks.

Pill testing programmes differ across the world

Pill testing programmes comprise different approaches and techniques. Some programmes are supported by national governments; others are tolerated by local agencies including the police.

Home testing

A common home testing method involves using a reagent test kit. A tiny part of a pill or sample of a powder is added to chemicals that change colour if certain drugs are present. The resultant colours of the tested sample are then matched up with a colour chart of known substances, such as cocaine or MDMA. If the colours do not match them the user is immediately aware that their substance

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contains other drugs and much greater caution must be exercised, with the recommendation being that users dispose of it. The test will not show the strength of the detected drug and some adulterants may not be detected.

Home testing kits provide very basic and incomplete information about the composition of a drug. Some people argue that the kits are 'better than nothing' while others say they provide a false sense of security and users may be more reckless if they believe the substance is not adulterated. The kits can be obtained online in Australia.

Onsite testing

On-site pill testing at outdoor festivals and in nightclubs has been running in the Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland and Austria for a number of years. More recently, on-site programmes have been initiated in the US and the UK. The programme components including the actual drug testing technology vary from one programme to another.

In the US, DanceSafe, a public health organization promoting health and safety within nightlife settings, have staff and trained volunteers use reagent test kits to help determine what might be in a drug. An evaluation of the programme showed that some people would reject taking a pill if it doesn't contain what they thought it did or had harmful additives.

The Loop, a non-profit NGO in the UK, introduced drug testing for public safety at nightclubs in 2013 and at festivals in 2014. The testing at that time was characterised as 'halfway house' testing because it involved testing substances obtained from on-site from the police, security seizures on the door and inside the venues and amnesty bins. Clubgoers were unable to provide drugs to be tested.

Since 2016 the Loop has delivered a 'front-of-house' program directly to festivalgoers and they can now directly submit samples for analysis. State-of-the-art laboratory technologies operated by chemists provide detailed results to the user as part of a confidential, individually tailored harm reduction package delivered by health professionals. This program has been supported by local public health authorities, police, as well as the event management. Most recently, in 2018 the Loop introduced its drug checking service to some UK city centre drugs treatment services, as well as operating for the general public at nine festivals.

An important feature of many on-site testing programmes is the effective and timely dissemination of information about drug test results. Alerts can be communicated about dangerous drugs to a large audience by social media and other communication channels.

In April 2018 the first onsite pill testing trial took place in Canberra. A report on the pilot was later released by the consortium that led the trial, with one of the recommendations being that *"further front-of-house pill testing, as part of a commitment to harm reduction services, be supported in the ACT"*. Currently there are no plans for further trials to be conducted in other states and territories.

Off-site testing

Off-site pill testing – away from the drug-taking environment – is available in a number of European countries. Some programmes engage directly with drug users, whilst others don't.

In the Netherlands and Switzerland, users are able to visit specific drug services and ask for a drug to be tested. Depending on the technology used to analyse the drug, users will revisit the service at a later time to receive the results. Personalised information and advice will also be provided to the individual.

In the UK, individuals are able to anonymously submit a sample for testing using standard mail to the WEDINOS (Welsh Emerging Drugs and Information of Novel Substances) project. The results of the drug analysis are published on a publicly accessible website.

There are a number of early warning systems across Europe, which involve samples being taken to private laboratories by the police, medical services and drugs services in response to drug related hospitalisations and deaths. The public do not have direct access to these services and there is no dissemination of results to individual users.

What are the limitations of pill testing?

Pill testing is not without limitations. Some of these include the following:

- **Pill testing results only relate to the sample that was tested and cannot give complete assurance about the contents or quality of a**

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wider batch of the drug. Two tablets might look the same but may be of different strength or even contain different drugs and adulterants.

- **No drug is completely safe and knowing what's in a drug doesn't mean the user won't experience problems.**
- **The evidence base in relation to the effectiveness of pill testing programmes in reducing harmful use or changing risk behaviours is recent and emerging.** A number of pill testing programmes, especially those that have direct contact with users, report positive behavioural outcomes including individuals choosing not to take further drugs in their possession. For example, the Loop suggest that about half of their customers take a smaller amount of a substance after visiting their service and about one in five either dispose of the substance or give it to the Loop for onward safe police destruction once they find out their test results. Moreover, for nine in ten Loop customers, the festival testing service is the first time they have spoken with healthcare staff about their own drug use.
- **Ecstasy/MDMA and other drugs are taken in many settings including a large number of clubs and bars and home environments. Increasing the coverage of on-site pill testing programmes will not be easy.** Testing equipment is expensive and a large number of trained staff and volunteers will be needed.

Testing alone cannot remove all the danger associated with ecstasy and other drugs. Emerging evidence suggests that if pill testing is made available it should be a part of a broad intervention that includes providing information and advice to individuals and communicating warnings to large audiences.

Implications for health teachers

Engaging students in drug education activities aims to assist them to make healthy and safe choices, identify risky situations and develop strategies to prepare them for challenging situations.

As more underage dance events are rolled-out and increasing numbers of students are coming into contact with ecstasy at an earlier age, it is important for schools to examine what role they should play in preparing young people for a safer nightlife experience in relation to ecstasy and the dance culture. If the topic of ecstasy and related drugs is

raised in a health lesson, it is possible that the issue of pill testing may arise.

Health teachers can help to improve knowledge and awareness on the risks associated with ecstasy. It is therefore suggested that the following messages be incorporated into alcohol and other drug prevention activities delivered in their classroom:

- **Pill testing alone cannot remove all the danger associated with ecstasy and other drugs.** At present, there is no laboratory-based testing programme in Australia.
- **The only way to ensure that a person comes to no harm from ecstasy use is for them not to take it.**
- **All young people, whether they choose to use ecstasy or not, need basic information on what to do in a drug-related emergency.**
- **Pill testing can provide an opportunity for young people to speak with healthcare staff about drug problems in a confidential and non-judgmental way, as well as to raise awareness of substances of concern in circulation.**

This fact sheet is part 2 of a three-part series about ecstasy/MDMA for teachers. The first, **Patterns of Use and Problems** provides background information about the drug, ecstasy culture, why people take the drug and the harms associated with its use. The third fact sheet, **Responses** discusses issues around harm reduction and how to look after people who have used the drug.

References

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