

Ecstasy | Responses

PART 3

Although the number of school-based young people who have used ecstasy continues to be low, the number rises significantly once they leave school. Currently, little, or no ecstasy education is provided in Australian schools.

The only way to ensure that a person comes to no harm from ecstasy is for them not to take it.

For those who are going to use the drug, however, it is important to ensure they have information that may reduce the potential harm associated with that use. In addition, all young people, whether they choose to use ecstasy or not, need basic information on what to do in a drug-related emergency.

How do you know if something is really wrong?

Key warning signs indicating that someone who has taken ecstasy could be in real danger include:

- very high body temperature
- profuse sweating
- muscle cramps
- seizures
- inability to cool down; a fast pulse rate and heartbeat when resting
- confusion and being unable to answer simple questions

If any of the above signs are visible, call 000 immediately.

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

- 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

Harm reduction and ecstasy

Delivering harm reduction messages around ecstasy in a classroom setting is controversial and there are many issues teachers need to consider. **Any information provided in this area must be age-appropriate and delivered at the right time.**

If the person does take ecstasy, however, the following steps may help to prevent harm:

- start with a small amount of the drug
- keep hydrated – ‘sip don’t gulp’ - and take regular breaks to cool down
- try not to mix ecstasy with other drugs, especially alcohol or other stimulants
- get help immediately if you start to feel unwell

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

- **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 that can be taken to reduce the likelihood of harm, however, it is not recommended that teachers necessarily provide these in a classroom setting.**
- **All young people, whether they choose to use ecstasy or not, need basic information on what to do in a drug-related emergency.**

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

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

Background

According to the latest Australian Secondary Students Alcohol and Other Drug (ASSAD) Survey, one in ten 17-year-old school-based males and one in 20 females of the same age have ever used the drug. Research suggests that the use of the drug rises significantly once they leave school.

As electronic dance music (EDM) grows in popularity and attendance at dance festivals continues to increase across the country, more young people are at the very least being exposed to ecstasy use. Currently, little, or no ecstasy education is provided in schools and much of the information users do access is via their peers and/or dealers. As a range of new issues face those who choose to use

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the drug, e.g., new law enforcement strategies, changing drug markets, sensational media reporting, as well as the proposed therapeutic use of MDMA, it is vital that young people have access to quality information that can assist them to make informed decisions.

How do you look after someone who has taken ecstasy?

All young people, whether they choose to use ecstasy or not, need basic information on what to do in a drug-related emergency.

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. These include:

- very high body temperature
- profuse sweating
- muscle cramps
- seizures
- inability to cool down; a fast pulse rate and heartbeat when resting
- confusion and being unable to answer simple questions

The problem with these warning signs is that users regard some of them, particularly high body temperature and sweating, as part of the experience. This makes ecstasy a difficult drug to deal with, as there is such a fine line between what may be seen as the 'normal', negative effects and those that mean the user is in danger.

If any of the above signs are visible, call 000 immediately.

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

- **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. As such, they must not be left by themselves. 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 and 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 to 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!
- **Reassure them** – this can be a very scary experience. Your friend needs to be reassured that the experience will end in time and that 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 (their breathing 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'** – ecstasy users can get into major problems by 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 are 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 rather than gulp 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 unsure of what to do.

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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.

For more information see DARTA's Illicit Drugs and Young People fact sheet, **How do you look after someone who has taken ecstasy?**

Harm reduction and ecstasy

The only way to ensure that a person comes to no harm from ecstasy use is for them not to take it. For those who are going to use the drug, however, it is important to ensure they have information that may reduce the potential harm associated with that use.

In most Australian schools, harm reduction messages are routinely provided around alcohol use, e.g., keeping hydrated, calling 000, the 'recovery position', how to prepare for a 'night out', etc. When it comes to illicit drugs, however, this is a controversial area and if health teachers are considering delivering harm reduction messages to young people they must be age-appropriate and delivered at correct time. Here are just some of the barriers to providing harm reduction messages to school-based young people:

- **who gets the messages?** Not all students will use this drug – how do you decide who needs this information?
- **who provides the messages?** Who has the expertise and the credibility to do this effectively and ensure that the information that is provided is accurate?
- **when are they provided and in what context?** If not provided to the whole class, i.e., you have identified specific students who could benefit from this information, how could this be done?
- **'safer' use messages around illicit drugs can be extremely controversial.** Some people believe the provision of such messages condones or even promotes drug use and when these are delivered in a school setting it can attract great attention
- **harm reduction messages can be complex** – as we have learned more about the harms associated with drugs like ecstasy, many of the

once simple messages such as 'keep hydrated' have now added caveats

- **'safe' and 'safer' are confusing terms, particularly for young people.** No harm reduction message ensures complete safety but that can be difficult to communicate to teens keen to experiment with a substance

If the person does take ecstasy, the following steps may help to prevent harm:

- Start low, go slow - users are advised to start with a small amount of the drug (say) a quarter of a tablet and then wait for two hours to gauge the effects.
- It is important for those using ecstasy or similar stimulant-type drugs not to get overheated. Keep hydrated with sips of water – 'sip don't gulp' - and take regular breaks to ensure you can cool down.
- Try not to mix ecstasy with other drugs, especially alcohol or other stimulants.
- **Get help immediately if you start to feel unwell.**

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. Although most activities conducted in schools aim to prevent drug use, students in many Australian schools are also provided basic harm reduction information, particularly around alcohol. It is important to remember that many of these same messages can be applied to the use of ecstasy, e.g., keeping hydrated, calling 000, the 'recovery position'.

As more underage dance events are rolled-out and increasing numbers of students are coming into contact with ecstasy from the age of 18, 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.

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

- **The only way to ensure that a person comes to no harm from ecstasy use is for them not**

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to take it. There are steps young people can take 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.**

This fact sheet is part 3 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 second fact sheet, **Pill Testing** includes information that could assist teachers in classroom discussions on the issue.