

How do you look after someone who has taken ecstasy?

Whether you take ecstasy or not, it is important to know what to do if someone you know is feeling unwell or when something is seriously wrong as a result of taking the drug. Even though ecstasy deaths are rare, they do happen and, when they do, they can happen quickly.

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**

If you see any of the above signs, 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**

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.

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, call 000.

ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU ARE A FRIEND, NOT A DOCTOR

What is ecstasy?

The chemical name for ecstasy is Methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). It is structurally similar to methamphetamine or ‘speed’ and has both stimulant and hallucinogenic effects. Ecstasy is sold as a tablet, capsule or in powder form. We also now see the drug being sold in crystal form. The strength of ecstasy varies enormously, as does the content of tablets, capsules and powders claiming to be ecstasy. There is no reliable method of determining what individuals are actually taking. Ecstasy is an illegal drug.

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 in the tablet, capsule and powder – whether that be MDMA or some other substance. Although ecstasy deaths are not the norm, many people feel unwell after taking a pill and seek help from friends, as well as from medical professionals.

MDMA affects the regulation of body temperature and can interfere with the body receiving warning signs about overheating. As a result, the body can reach extreme temperatures (41-42°C) leading to

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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, including alcohol.

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. This can affect how the brain stem controls heart and breathing functions and can lead to coma and death. This is often referred to as 'water intoxication'.

Some substances found in 'ecstasy' tablets, capsules and powders are particularly dangerous and may likely be the cause of more harm, including death, than MDMA. For example, PMA is an extremely toxic form of amphetamine. The uncertainty about what an individual has taken can make it extremely difficult to treat someone if they become unwell since medical staff cannot be certain as to what they have actually taken. On rare occasions, MDMA has caused fatal overdoses.

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**
- **inability to cool down; 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 many ecstasy users regard some of them, particularly high body temperature and sweating, as simply part of the experience. This makes ecstasy a difficult drug to deal with, as there is a fine line between what may be seen as the 'normal', negative effects and those that mean the user is in danger.

If for any reason you think the situation is getting out of control and your friend is in trouble, call 000 immediately. It is important to remember that if it doesn't feel right, it usually isn't!

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.

Some ecstasy users may experience panic attacks after taking the drug. The person may find breathing difficult; it may feel too slow or too fast and they may have difficulty swallowing. They may also be sweating or trembling and complain of a headache, backache, chest pains or palpitations. Although panic attacks can be alarming, they're relatively harmless and usually pass.

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 and comfortable 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 and you want to try to minimise any additional stimulation if you can.

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

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. 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 frightening experience. Your friend needs to be reassured that it 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' – 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 are not, make sure they drink 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 gulping down a whole bottle.

If in doubt, call 000 – when things go wrong after taking ecstasy, they usually go terribly wrong and you may 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.

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.