

Ecstasy

Brownies, dolphins, doves, E, eckies, Edward, fantasy, love doves, MDMA, MDMA powder, M and Ms, New Yorkers, sweeties, tulips, X, XTC, 3,4, methylenedioxymethamphetamine

What is ecstasy?

Ecstasy is an illegally manufactured drug that usually comes in tablet or capsule form. The chemical name of pure ecstasy ecstasy is 3,4 methylenedioxymethamphetamine or MDMA for short

The appearance of ecstasy varies considerably ranging from brown, white or pink tablets to yellow, clear, red and black or red and yellow capsules.

Some pills also have pictures, designs or logos on them.

Ecstasy can also come in powder form known as 'MDMA powder'. Although police seizures of MDMA powder have increased in recent years, it remains less common than ecstasy tablets or capsules. Ecstasy is also very occasionally sold as crystals.

Ecstasy is usually taken orally, but it may also be snorted.



UK Situation

Ecstasy remains a popular drug, particularly among those who are into the clubbing/dance scene, although there are indications that use may be decreasing. Findings from the 2007/08 British Crime Survey show that 1.5% of 16 to 59 year olds and 3.9% of 16 to 24 year olds reported using ecstasy in the last year. Based on the survey's findings, it is estimated that 2.39 million people in the 16- 59 age group have used ecstasy at least once in their lifetime with 470,000 having used the drug in the last year. [1]

When compared with data from the previous five years, the 2007/08 figures mark the lowest reported levels of ecstasy use. For example, findings from the 2003/04 British Crime Survey showed that 2% of 16 to 59 year olds and 5.3% of 16 to 24 year olds reported using ecstasy in the last year. Based on those results, it was estimated that 614,000 16 to 59 year olds had used ecstasy at some point in the last year in 2003/04.

16 to 59 year olds in England and Wales reporting using ecstasy in the last year	2003/04	2004/05	2005/06	2006/07	2007/08
Percentage of respondents reporting ecstasy use in the last year	2.0%	1.8%	1.6%	1.8%	1,5%
Best estimate of the number of people who have used ecstasy in the last year	614,000	556,000	502,000	567,000	470,000

There have been over 200 reported deaths in the UK linked to ecstasy use over the last 5 years. Figures from the National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths (np-SAD) show that, in 2007, ecstasy-type drugs were associated with 10 deaths where ecstasy was the only drug involved and 45 deaths ecstasy was implicated along with other drugs. [3]

Psychoactive substances implicated in death, np-SAD cases, 2003 to 2007	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of recorded deaths where ecstasy was the only substance implicated	8	14	19	18	10
Number of recorded deaths where ecstasy was implicated alongside other drugs	45	53	51	38	37

Why this particular group of people died when so many others have also taken the drug is unknown, but we do know something about the medical circumstances surrounding their deaths. To find out more about ecstasy-related deaths and their possible cause click [here](#).

Purity and price

For some while, it has been clear that many tablets sold as ecstasy are not what purchasers think they are. The amount of ecstasy in a tablet can vary greatly. Tablets have been analysed and some contained no ecstasy but other drugs such as amphetamine or Ketamine. Others have been found to contain some ecstasy but mixed with other drugs or a range of adulterants.

The price of ecstasy has fallen. When the drug first hit the dance scene, a pill typically cost £25. Today, prices have fallen to as low as £1 - £5, depending on the quantity of pills bought and their quality. The 2008 DrugScope Street Drug Trends Survey found that the national average price for MDMA powder was estimated at £35 to £40 a gram. [3] Though often as strong or pure as they were in the late 1980s, the quality of ecstasy pills today can vary greatly.

At some clubs in the Netherlands, users can submit their pills to a rough test to get some idea what is in them before they decide to take them. Since the late nineties some companies have promoted a similar testing kit in the UK which was criticised by the then government 'drugs czar' as condoning drug use, despite its potential for reducing harm [4]. The police have also warned that anybody handing back a tablet after testing it, could in theory be prosecuted for supplying the drug.

Despite all the warnings about the dangers of ecstasy, many young people continue to use it. This has led to 'safer dancing' campaigns that encourage clubs to have 'chill out' areas, make sure staff are trained in first aid and ensure the water taps in the toilets are working so that users can access a supply of clean, free, water to drink.

Because ecstasy is related to amphetamine, it was already banned in the UK before it became popular in the late 1980s via the House music scene which had developed in America and Ibiza. Ecstasy was used to stay up for all night dancing and was seen as promoting empathy and communication between people. It quickly became an important part of the dance scene.

The law

Ecstasy is controlled as a Class A drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act. It is illegal to be in possession of the drug or supply it. Ecstasy cannot be prescribed by doctors.

The maximum penalties for possession of ecstasy are 7 years imprisonment plus a fine and for supply is life imprisonment plus a fine.

Effects/risks

Ecstasy is a stimulant drug which also has mild hallucinogenic effects. It has been described as being like a mix of amphetamine and a weak form of LSD. The effects of taking a moderate dose start after 20-60 minutes (longer if on a full stomach) and can last for up to several hours.

The pupils become dilated, the jaw tightens and there is often brief nausea, sweating, dry mouth and throat. The blood pressure and heart rate increases and loss of appetite is common.

Many users experience an initial rushing feeling followed by a combination of feeling energetic and yet calm. Loss of anger, empathy with other people and an enhanced sense of communication are commonly reported. Some users also report a heightened sense of their surroundings, greater appreciation of music and increased sexual and sensual experience.

Some users have bad experiences. This may include feeling anxious and panicky, confusion and unpleasant distortion of the senses that may, in some manner or other, last for days, even weeks. This is more likely if users take high doses or are already feeling anxious or unstable.

The disorientating effect may make accidents more likely. A number of ecstasy-related deaths have been connected with non-stop dancing in hot, crowded clubs leading to overheating and dehydration. Taking a break from dancing, cooling down and drinking water regularly (to replace that lost by sweating) can prevent this happening.

However, it is very important to remember that drinking too much water in one go can, in itself, be dangerous. Some ecstasy-related deaths have been linked to water intoxication (or hyponatremia) due to excessive fluid intake. Sipping no more than a pint of water an hour to replace lost fluids when dancing is recommended.

After taking ecstasy users may feel very tired and low and need a long period of sleep to recover. This may last up to three or four days, known as a comedown. Regular use may lead to sleep problems, lack of energy, dietary problems and feeling depressed or anxious. Increased susceptibility to colds, flu, sore throat etc may follow. While physical dependence is not a problem, psychological dependence on the feelings of euphoria and calmness and the whole scene around ecstasy use can develop.

Short term mood changes such as the 'mid-week hangover' following weekend use, and impairments in short term memory function may be considered as some of the milder consequences of MDMA use. There have been indications of liver damage in some ecstasy users, but it is unclear whether this is a more immediate consequence of heatstroke or due to toxicity over the longer term.

The exact functional consequences of MDMA neurotoxicity, i.e., the cognitive, behavioural and emotional changes in users, and their severity, especially in the longer term, are as yet not clear. Researchers agree that ecstasy use can deplete levels of serotonin and, in some cases, have an impact on certain areas of the brain. However, there is no agreement that these effects of the drug constitute irreversible 'brain damage' that will impact the user in years to come. Some research has also suggested that prolonged ecstasy use, particularly at high doses, can cause a degree of memory deficiency and periods of depression.

History

Ecstasy was first made by two German chemists in 1912 and patented in 1914, in case it turned out to be a useful drug. It didn't. During the 1950s, the American military experimented with a whole range of drugs, including ecstasy, for use in chemical warfare, to extract information from prisoners and to immobilise armies. In the 1960s, the drug was rediscovered by an American research chemist Alexander Shulgin who experimented with it on himself.

Ecstasy has a strange property in that it can make users feel in tune' with each other. Because of this, some American therapists, especially those seeing couples whose marriage was failing, administered the drug to help couples be more willing to see the other person's point of view. Some therapists in Switzerland still prescribe the drug in this way. However, some tests on rats which indicated that ecstasy might damage the brain in some way, led it to being banned in the USA in 1985.

References

[1] UK. Home Office. Drug Misuse Declared: Findings from the 2007/08 Crime Survey. October 2008

[2] National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths (2008) 'Drug-Related Deaths in the UK' St Georges' Hospital Medical School.

[3] Street drug prices. Druglink: Sep.-Oct., 20(5), 2005, p.32. (Druglink factsheet14).

[4] BBC News (1998) 'Calls to ban ecstasy testing kit'

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/101369.stm> Updated

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Other Sources of information

<p>Local organisations that offer Assessment & Treatment options for people with addictions:</p> <p>EDAS – Mental Health and Alcohol & Substance Misuse Support in Poole Tel 01202 735777 hello@edasuk.org www.edasuk.org</p> <p>EDAS/REACH YP – Free and confidential drug and alcohol service for under 25s who live in the Borough of Poole and County of Dorset Tel 0800 0434656 www.edasuk.org/yp</p> <p>WE ARE WITH YOU Tel 01202558855 www.wearewithyou.org.uk</p> <p>EDP Tel 01305 571264 info@edp.org.uk</p>		<p>National organisations that offer treatment, advice, information & support for people with addictions:</p> <p>ALCOHOL CHANGE Tel 020 3907 8480 www.alcoholchange.org.uk</p> <p>FRANK Tel 0300 1236600 Text 82111 www.talktofrank.com</p>
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