

PROBLEMS WITH ECSTASY USE

Problems associated with ecstasy use may include:

PHYSICAL PROBLEMS

Reduced energy levels can be common. The immune system can become run down, leading to increased susceptibility to infections, colds, flu and other viruses. Problems with concentration, memory and processing information can occur, along with increased risk of liver and kidney damage.

EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS

- Increased sexual risk-taking behaviour due to feelings of decreased inhibition (people may take advantage of this, and there may be unwanted or unsafe sex)
- Financial problems
- Involvement in criminal activities
- Loss of interest in social activities apart from partying
- Increased aggression leading to assaults
- Relationship and family problems
- Poor or reduced study or work performance.

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

- Increased frequency and severity of mood swings
- Intensified disturbing thoughts and paranoia
- Aggravated symptoms of mental illness.

There can be a 'come down' experienced following the use of ecstasy. People may experience mild anxiety and depression, muscle aches, sleep problems, reduced concentration and loss of appetite. These symptoms may last from a day to a week.

Regular use, high doses and injecting of ecstasy may cause ongoing mental health problems such as suicidal thoughts, panic attacks, severe depression, anxiety and paranoia.

There is an increased risk of experiencing a psychotic episode. If psychosis has happened before, there is also increased risk auditory and visual hallucinations.



ECSTASY and related drugs

Ecstasy is the common name for Methylene Dioxymethamphetamine, or MDMA. Street or slang names include: eccy, 'E', or pills.

MDMA was first made in Germany in 1912. In the 1970s, a chemist Alexander Shulgin reignited interest in its use, and psychotherapists used it in a controlled environment as a therapeutic tool to help their clients explore their feelings. By the 1980s, MDMA was being used recreationally, and had been adopted by the dance party culture in Ibiza and Goa where it was used at 'rave' and 'dance' parties to help party-goers dance all night to fast electronic music. This eventually spread to other parts of the world, including Australia.

Forms of the drug

Ecstasy is a term used for a range of drugs that are sold under the guise of synthetic drugs, usually sold as small tablets (or pills) that come in a variety of colours and sizes. It also comes in capsule form or as a powder, and can be snorted or injected. Much of the so-called ecstasy sold in Australia is in fact amphetamine-based.

Drug effects

Ecstasy is classified as a stimulant with hallucinogenic properties or hallucinogenic amphetamine, which means it combines the effects of hallucinogens and stimulants. It is commonly known to make users feel warm and loving, even towards people they may not know well. Ecstasy is primarily used for its euphoric, mood-altering effect, which makes it a popular stimulant for dancing and partying. The short-term effects of using ecstasy may include:

- Increased feelings of self confidence, well being and feeling close to others
- A rise in blood pressure, body temperature, pulse rate and sweating
- Jaw clenching and teeth grinding

- Dehydration, nausea and anxiety
- A hangover effect on the next day, which makes concentration difficult
- Symptoms can include loss of appetite, insomnia, depression and muscle aches
- Heightened sexual desire and intensification of the sexual experience.

People who should never use MDMA or similar drugs include those with high blood pressure, a heart condition, on certain prescription medication, diabetes, asthma, epilepsy, depression or other mental illness.

Effects start after about 20 minutes to an hour and can last up to six hours, but may last as long as 32 hours. Some ecstasy users experiment with injecting the drug, but rarely do this regularly, as the effect has been reported as being quite overpowering.

MDMA seems to work by boosting the levels of two brain chemicals:

- Serotonin, which is the neurotransmitter that creates feelings of well-being and pleasure
- Dopamine, which affects mood and muscle control and acts as a pain suppressant.

If a person is experiencing symptoms of psychosis

Take the person to a quiet place away from noise and people.

Make sure they don't take any more ecstasy.

Give them reassurance and stay calm. Don't argue with them, even if what they say does not make sense. Don't leave them alone.

Call for assistance if they become aggressive or you are concerned that they might hurt themselves or someone else. Contact a mental health service or the accident emergency department of your local hospital for advice.

Overdose

The risk of ecstasy overdose is low; however it may cause strokes, heart failure, brain haemorrhage, heart attack, high fever or coma. Injecting increases the risk of overdose as it allows large amounts of the drug to enter the blood stream quickly. Overheating and dehydration are the most common risks associated with the use of ecstasy.

Overdose first aid

There are some basic steps to follow if someone passes out or experiences other complications from using ecstasy.

People may experience panic attacks or hyperventilate. In this case they may need reassurance and encouragement to slow down their breathing.

If someone overheats or begins to dehydrate, they may be hot but unable to sweat, have cramps, severe headache, dizziness, vomiting, feel suddenly tired, or want to go to the toilet without actually needing to. They could also experience heart palpitations, shortness of breath, blurred vision, wheezing and fitting. Move them to a cool, quiet safe place, splash the face with cool water, remove unnecessary clothing and get them cool. Call an ambulance.

If the person is unconscious, turn them on their side to reduce the risk of them vomiting and choking. Make sure their airways are clear. Do not leave them alone. Call an ambulance immediately on 000 or 112 from a mobile phone (you don't need credit or to be in range).

If breathing has stopped, give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. If there is no pulse, commence CPR (cardio-pulmonary resuscitation) if you are trained.

Dependency and tolerance

There is a myth that people can't develop a tolerance to ecstasy; however, with the regular use of most drugs, a tolerance will be experienced. Regular users may assume that if they do not feel the same effects of taking ecstasy that this is due to the lack of strength or purity. However, weekly or monthly use of ecstasy can create a tolerance. This means that more ecstasy is needed to get the same effects as before. People can also develop tolerance to the pleasurable effects of ecstasy. Although it is still unclear whether a physical dependence can develop, psychological dependence is a risk. Those who become accustomed to partying and socialising while on ecstasy may feel unable to communicate, make friends, or enjoy themselves, without using MDMA or a similar drug.

Withdrawal

There are no indicators of physical withdrawal symptoms; however, there have been indications that regular users may experience psychological withdrawal symptoms such as mild anxiety and depression, reduced motivation, or emotional vulnerability for a

period of time once they stop regular use of the drug.

Detox and treatment

Phone the Alcohol & Drug Information Service in your State (see rear cover) for details of services able to provide withdrawal, treatment and support options. Counselling and support from a drug counsellor or psychologist may be necessary in either managing the drug use or working towards abstinence from the drug.

Other related drugs

Ketamine: (Special K) is an anaesthetic with hallucinogenic effect. Apart from adverse reactions similar to those described for ecstasy, the main concern with Special K is the risk of being injured as it blocks out pain. Ketamine is sometimes sold as ecstasy or mixed with ecstasy.

GHB: (also known as GBH, Fantasy, Liquid E or Liquid X) is also an anaesthetic. At low doses it induces a feeling of calm, relaxation and mild euphoria. At high doses it can cause sedation, nausea, vomiting, muscle stiffness, confusion, convulsions and, in some cases, coma or respiratory collapse. A number of fatalities in Australia and overseas have been attributed to GHB.

PMA: (para-methoxyamphetamine) is an amphetamine-type drug with hallucinogenic effects. It has no medical uses, and has been used recreationally since the 1970s. It may be fraudulently sold as ecstasy in the form of a white powder or small beige, pink or yellow tablet. However, its use carries high risks, and a number of deaths in Australia have been linked to its use. The effects may include erratic eye movements, muscle spasms, increased body temperature, nausea and vomiting. In higher doses, it is potentially lethal, and can cause hypothermia, breathing problems, heart and renal failure, convulsions, coma and death.

Tips for families

Some tips for supporting a loved one with an ecstasy problem are to avoid panicking and get information about the effects of ecstasy use.

Keep communicating and avoid pleading or nagging. Don't only talk about the problem. Choose your moment to express your concern.

Encourage them to try to reduce some of the risks of using ecstasy. If they use in a regular social group, encourage the group of friends to look after each other, and to be aware of what to do if there are problems.

Learn the signs, and know what to do in an emergency, such as overheating or a psychotic episode. Have contact numbers readily available. If there is violence, have a safety plan. Being supportive does not mean you have to be at risk.

It's okay to talk about it. Get support for yourself even if they don't want help.

FDS - acknowledgement to National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC)

DRUG-INDUCED PSYCHOSIS

One of the risks of ecstasy use is drug-induced psychosis. The symptoms are similar to those of schizophrenia. Symptoms of psychosis may appear quickly and last a few hours, days or until the effects of the drug wear off. Symptoms of psychosis may include:

- Visual hallucinations
- Paranoia, suspiciousness
- Blunted, flat or inappropriate emotions
- Social isolation and withdrawal
- Severe anxiety and panic attacks
- Change in perceptual experiences such as smell, sound or colour
- Disorientation and memory problems
- Uncontrolled violent behaviour.

In some cases, mental health intervention is required. However the user remains vulnerable to further episodes of psychosis if the drug is used again. They are likely to be vulnerable during the 'come down' from ecstasy.

WHAT TO DO IF A PERSON HAS SYMPTOMS OF PSYCHOSIS

Take person to a quiet place away from noise and people. Make sure they don't take any more ecstasy.

Give them reassurance and stay calm. Don't argue with them even if what they say does not make sense. Don't leave them alone.

Call for assistance if they become aggressive, or you are concerned that they might hurt themselves or someone else. Contact a mental health service or the accident emergency department of your local hospital for advice.

DEHYDRATION & OVERHEATING

This appears to be the most common risk associated with ecstasy use.

It is important to keep hydrated while on ecstasy. Drinking water does not dilute the effects of ecstasy, it only prevents dehydration. However, drinking too much water may lead to brain swelling and in some cases coma and death.

If inactive (not dancing) drink about 250ml (a small bottle) of water or fruit juice per hour.

If active (dancing etc.) drink about 500ml (a big bottle) of water or fruit juice per hour.

Take time to cool down. Have a break about every 15 minutes from dancing. Splash face with cold water. Allow breathing and heart rate to slow down.