



NATIONAL DRUG AND
ALCOHOL RESEARCH CENTRE

NATIONAL CENTRE ISSUES WARNING ON ECSTASY

For release: 21 December 2005

In the past few months there have been reports across Australia of ecstasy users experiencing a range of health problems. Unfortunately there have also been a number of ecstasy-related deaths.

The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) is taking the unprecedented step of issuing a warning to ecstasy users about the unusually high strength pills currently on the streets that are causing both fatal and non-fatal overdoses.

Ecstasy is a street term for a number of substances that are related to MDMA or methylenedioxymethamphetamine. The drug can contain a wide variety of amphetamine-related substances including MDEA, MDA or in the worse case scenario, PMA, the substance linked to ecstasy deaths that occurred in Adelaide in the late 1990s. Ecstasy is made by backyard chemists and as a consequence the quality of the drug varies greatly.

A tablet of ecstasy that contains about 80-100 mgs of MDMA is usually thought to provide the effect of the desired intensity. Most seizures in Australia are rarely found to contain that amount of the drug, with levels ranging from no active stimulant through to approximately 100mgs. Recent toxicology data indicates that those ecstasy pills that actually contain MDMA are significantly stronger than Australian ecstasy users are traditionally used to.

Australian data shows that the average purity of MDMA in those pills that contain the drug has not altered. However, what is notable is the range in purity levels from between 20% to 50%. With pills averaging a weight of between 200-250 mg, this can mean doses of well over 100mgs of MDMA. This means that even single pills could lead to significant doses of MDMA and potential overdose.

“Unfortunately, people still believe that the majority of problems caused by ecstasy are due to impurities, i.e. the other substances that are found in a tablet,” said Mr Paul Dillon, Information Manager from NDARC at the University of New South Wales. “This is a myth – very rarely do we find that there are substances in ecstasy that are more toxic than MDMA. Although there are exceptions (PMA being the main culprit in Australia), the major problems that we continue to see with ecstasy are related to dehydration and overheating, directly linked to MDMA.”

Recent studies have shown that ecstasy users are now taking significantly more pills in any one occasion. Anecdotal reports of 'double dropping' (taking two pills at the same time) and 'triple dropping' (three pills) is of great concern at any time, but when the pills contain significantly more MDMA the risk of a fatal overdose is much greater.

"With these high strength pills it would appear that some people are getting into real difficulty with the drug. It is important to remember that MDMA by itself can cause all of the symptoms reported. Once again we come down to the simple fact that MDMA is not a drug without risk. Things can go wrong and to put this down to possible adulterants is just plain ignorance!"

"In the week before the biggest party season of the year we urge ecstasy users to be aware of the very real risks associated with their drug of choice. MDMA is not a safe drug – with the current batch of pills available, overdose is a very real risk!"

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