

frequently asked questions



Ecstasy

Introduction

What is ecstasy?

The Microsoft Word dictionary defines ecstasy as “a feeling of intense delight”, so who am I to argue with Bill Gates?

Ecstasy or ‘E’ was the original street name given to a drug that has both ‘speedy’ and ‘trippy’ effects (known as a ‘hallucinogenic amphetamine’). A chemical name for this drug is *3,4-Methylenedioxyethylamphetamine* or **MDMA*** for short. It was first made in 1914 during research into appetite suppressants, but was regarded as having no medical or commercial use until the 1970s when therapists in the USA and Switzerland started using it to help couples with relationship problems express their emotions. Its use spread to the U.S drug scene, emerging in Britain and Spain in the 1980s as the prototype drug of the acid-house/rave sub-culture. Ecstasy is no longer a ‘new’ drug, the children of the first ‘luv’d up’ generation are now using E themselves. Although the drug has lost much of its trendy sheen, the users of today take it for the same reasons they always have – to get that feeling of intense delight.

* MDMA comes from a family of over 200 drugs sometimes known as *Phenethylamines*. Other members of this drug family include MDEA (‘eve’), MDA (the ‘love drug’), 2CB and 2Ci. In 1991 Alexander Shulgin wrote a recipe book about them called ‘PIHKAL: A Chemical Love Story’ (PIHKAL stands for Phenethylamines I Have Known and Loved).

Any tips on pronouncing the chemical name?

3,4-Methylenedioxymethylamphetamine or MDMA for short is the chemical name for ecstasy, (use the 3,4 at the front if you want to really show off).

To pronounce it simply break it down. Meth - a - lean - die - oxy - meth - all - amphetamine, though care should be taken when attempting this in a West Midlands accent.

Does all ecstasy contain MDMA?

Ecstasy was the name originally given to pills that contained MDMA, however, there has always been a hugely variable chemical content to what is sold on the street, even in the late 1980s. During the 00s the price of an ecstasy pill dropped dramatically, as did the quality – you had more chance of buying one containing rocking horse shit than MDMA. It was therefore, no surprise when ecstasy began to be vaguely referred to as ‘pills’ or ‘tablets’.

At the end of the 00s a range of cathinone based drugs, in particular *mephedrone/M-cat*, emerged in Europe. Mephedrone was at first sold as a ‘legal high’ but became popular as a substitute for the poor quality of both ecstasy and cocaine around at the time. Both powdered and crystal MDMA had been in the UK since the late 90s, but they also became more readily available, popular, and seen as more reliable than pills. Ten years ago most pills contained little if any MDMA, however, most pills tested in the last few years do contain MDMA, some of them in very high doses of more than 250 mg. The list of drugs never or rarely found in ecstasy is probably shorter than a list of those that are. While adulterants can cause problems, fatalities usually involve taking more than one drug and alcohol and pills containing MDMA alone can and do kill.

What drugs are mis-sold as ecstasy?

It is important to remember that most deaths reported appear to be as a result of bingeing on more than one drug and alcohol or as a result of the potency of MDMA. However, every year drugs sold as ecstasy turn out not to contain MDMA. In most cases this simply results in users not getting the desired effect. In some cases the drugs involved are more dangerous than MDMA.

From 2010 onwards a number of deaths were associated with pills sold as ecstasy but which contained **PMA** (*paramethoxyamphetamine*) or **PMMA** (*paramethoxymethylamphetamine* – which is converted to PMA in the body). This drug seems to be more toxic than MDMA, the effects can feel less potent and can take up to two hours to come up, resulting in users thinking their pills are weak and re-dosing and thus increasing the risks of a potentially fatal toxic reaction. In the last few years **Alpha PVP** has been one of the main drugs sold as MDMA. Alpha PVP is a synthetic cathinone and thought to cause severe psychotic reactions in some users. Most recently **N-ethyl-pentalone**, which is also known as ephylone – (with a ‘p’ not a ‘th’) or **BK-EPD** has been sold as MDMA. Very little is known about this drug, but it is thought to be potent at lower doses than MDMA, resulting in people using toxic doses of N-ethyl-pentalone.

How can you tell which pills are toxic?

Most pills are branded with different shapes and logos and there are a number of online pill report sites that have both user feedback and DIY re-agent test results. However, pill report sites are rarely based on accurate drug analysis (WEDINOS is the exception and The Loop also test at clubs and festivals). It is also the case that when one ‘brand’ gets itself a reputation, another copycat look-a-like appears. This makes identifying ‘rogue’ pills, powder and crystals very difficult. Although checking out online sites is advised, now as ever,

the look and appearance of a pill or a mate saying they had one just like it last week, is no guarantee that it will do 'exactly what it says on the tin'. Using re-agent tests which are readily available online, is also advisable. These can (if used correctly) give an indication of the content of pills or powder. However, although a useful indication, these tests are by no means full proof, can not tell you how potent a pill is and even if a test is positive for MDMA, it will not detect any adulterants or other drugs present.

What drugs are mixed with ecstasy?

Many users mix ecstasy with other drugs to bring on and control the initial effects or to heighten or modify the main effects, and/or to reduce or 'cover' negative after-effects like the comedown. Some drugs are used for all three purposes, notably alcohol, cannabis and cocaine. Other drugs are used specifically to boost or extend the main effects of ecstasy, like speed and mind-bending drugs like LSD, GHB, and ketamine, along with over-the-counter pharmacy drugs (e.g. Vick's Sinex inhalers, Sudafed cough medicine) and prescription-only drugs such as anti-depressants (eg. Prozac and Viagra).

How much is used to get high?

The amount of MDMA needed depends on body weight (as well as sex and other factors). The basic rule is around 0.75 mg per pound of body weight (about 1.5 mg per kilogram) – so, a standard dose of MDMA is between 75 and 150 mg, averaging 120 mg. MDA and MDE are more potent, with standard doses being more in the range 50 to 125 mg. Unfortunately, because ecstasy is so adulterated there is simply no way of knowing what you are taking, let alone how much.

Ecstasy and the law

What are the laws controlling ecstasy?

Ecstasy is a Class A drug, which means that the maximum sentences are seven years for possession and life for trafficking (and an unlimited fine in either case). *The Misuse of Drugs Act* also places ecstasy-type drugs in Schedule 1, which means having no medical use – it cannot be prescribed by doctors or dispensed by pharmacists.

Possession: Being caught with an amount of pills that the police consider to be for 'personal use' will result in you being charged with possession of a Class A drug and is usually dealt with by a fine or a caution for adults. For those under 18, being caught in possession means either a 'Youth Caution' (the equivalent of a caution) or a 'Youth Conditional Caution'. A 'Youth Conditional Caution' could mean you have to attend a 'Youth Offending Team' for up to three months.

Possession with intent to supply: If you are caught with more drugs than is considered 'personal use' you can be charged with 'possession with intent to supply'. The problem with this is, what counts as personal use has varied greatly depending on the opinion of the police and courts. Some people have been charged with possession with intent for as little as 6 pills, whilst others have been charged with just simple possession for up to 50 pills.

Why do clubs bother to catch people?

The 1997 Public Entertainments Licenses (Drug Misuse) Act empowers local authorities to close down nightclubs immediately (by revoking their entertainment and other licenses) if a serious drug problem (especially trafficking) has been identified. This means that local councils can shut down just about any nightclub they want to (if this law was applied to prisons and secondary schools, most of them would have to be closed down too!). In effect this has meant that clubs have been forced to be far more vigilant in detecting drug use and dealing than they were 'back in the day'.

Can security staff search inside your pants?

When security staff ask to search you on entry to a club or inside a club, you have to comply or else leave. They are only allowed to look in pockets and bags, ask you to remove outer clothing (e.g. coats, hats), and to pat your limbs and some parts of your torso. Some go into the legal grey area of looking into people's mouths, or making them remove shoes and socks, but they cannot by law ask you to remove your shirt/top, trousers, dress/skirt or underwear – or pat your body in the genital area (and breast area for women).

What happens if you're caught by the bouncers?

Sounds painful and sometimes it can be. You are far more likely to get caught by security staff at pubs and nightclubs than by the police. If you are caught with a 'small' amount, they may just take the drugs from you and kick you out or they may call the police, it really depends on the policy of the club.

Is it illegal to drive while on ecstasy?

Road Traffic laws make it an offence to drive while unfit through the use of ecstasy or any other drugs (maximum sentence six months), and to cause death by careless driving whilst intoxicated by drugs (maximum sentence 10 years). In December 2004, new powers were given to the police to compel drivers to undertake roadside impairment tests if they are suspected of driving under the influence of drugs. These tests include things like walking in a straight line and holding up a chart with black dots in front of your eyes to compare pupil size. Refusal to participate in these tests is an offence in the same way as failure to provide an alcohol breath test. Since 2015 they can also use a roadside drug kit to screen for illegal drugs.

If they think you're unfit to drive because of taking drugs, you'll be arrested and will have to take a blood or urine test at a police station. You will be charged if the test shows you've taken drugs. Over half of ecstasy users say they have driven a vehicle under its influence. As with alcohol, ecstasy increases your confidence while affecting perception, coordination and memory, leading to reduced driving performance – not as bad as when drunk, but bad enough to risk accidents. Driving during comedowns may be just as risky, due to fatigue and moodiness.

How long can ecstasy be detected in drug tests?

Ecstasy can be detected in urine (or other body fluids) for up to three days after it was last used. The precise duration depends on water intake, exercise, metabolism, etc. Most urine tests for 'ecstasy' test positive whether you have taken MDMA, MDEA or MDA. You may also test positive for 'ecstasy' if you have been using methamphetamine (the stronger of the two forms of speed, also know as 'methedrine' or 'ice').

Effects

How does ecstasy affect the brain?

When swallowed, ecstasy takes 20 to 60 minutes to reach the brain and for the effects to start. Effects come on in seconds when injected or smoked, minutes when snorted (sniffed up nose). The brain works by transmitting electrical signals between its billions of cells, which are converted to chemicals (called *neurotransmitters*). MDMA raises the levels of three main neurotransmitters in the brain: *noradrenaline* – which governs the brain's energy levels (including alertness, movement and anxiety); *dopamine* – the brain's main reward (pleasure) chemical, affected by virtually all drugs; and *serotonin* (known as 5HT) – a master neurotransmitter which controls other neurotransmitters, as well as mood, memory etc.

Serotonin is the main neurotransmitter boosted by hallucinogenic drugs like LSD, while dopamine and noradrenaline are the two neurotransmitters whose brain levels are raised by cocaine and amphetamines. This is why MDMA has both speedy and trippy effects. It first raises serotonin levels, which you experience as perceptual and emotional enhancements; but after one to two hours, it primarily raises dopamine and noradrenaline levels, experienced as euphoria and general stimulation (see below).

What does using ecstasy feel like?

Ecstasy has been classified as both a hallucinogen and a stimulant. Some experts believe that it belongs to a 'new' group, called either 'empathogens', because it uniquely increases empathy (understanding of others), or 'enactogens', because it has unique effects on people's emotional and tactile sensitivity (touchy feely). Overall, the effects last four to six hours, with a few hours of residual effects. The four main words used to describe the effects of a standard dose are greater energy (stimulation), happiness (euphoria), friendliness (empathy), and calmness (serenity). Higher doses of ecstasy can produce far more intense effects, but higher doses than this mainly raise pulse-rate and temperature to uncomfortable levels, along with nausea, blurred vision, panting, muscular tension and headache.

User account: 28 year old male

"I had never been able to dance, so after necking my first ever E, I told my mates that I would sit by the bar and watch them dancing. They were like 'yeah sure!' and boogied off to the dance floor. I smoked a joint and felt nicely stoned; then about 30 minutes later, I started to feel a bit queasy and wobbly, but was also getting an energetic and excited feeling bubbling up inside me. The music gradually mixed into 'Everything Starts with an E', and I felt something shifting inside my head, like a big wave moving across my brain. I suddenly sprang to my feet, ran over to my mates, and started dancing like a lunatic. Huge waves of energy went down my spine and through my body, the music sounded heavenly, everyone looked beautiful, I felt incredibly happy, and wanted to stay in this moment forever. I could not believe what was happening. Someone I didn't know hugged me and though I expected to have mixed feelings about this, it felt good and I hugged them back and smiled like an idiot.

My heart was racing, my skin was hot, my jaw was clenched, and when I danced into the toilets I saw in the mirror that my pupils were almost totally dilated – black on white. It was three days later before I could stop moving to the music inside my head ...”

User account: 40 year old woman

“... one of my most memorable Es was in the Summer of 2001. It was a beautiful Saturday, and around midday, my partner and I decided to take a Mitsubishi and go to the local park. I had taken Es about three times before, when with groups of friends at a party or club. About 30 minutes after taking it I felt it coming on – a lift in my mood, and a warm feeling inside. But over the next half-hour things started changing in an unpleasant way. I was starting to feel hot and sick, and began breathing rapidly. The feelings got worse, and I started to feel panicky and was getting very hot and sweaty.

My partner, who had taken a lot more Es than me, noticed the state I was getting into, asked me lots of questions about how I was feeling, and then just ‘took over’. I was so glad he was there because I felt so confused and shaky that I’m sure I would not have been able to find my way out of the park, which looked strange and jungle-like. He led me to a quiet part of the park, and I lay down on the grass. He gave me water to sip, and kept talking to me and wafting cool air on to my face, telling me to breathe evenly and slowly and kept reassuring me that I’d be alright in a while.

After about 10 minutes I started feeling better, and after another 10 minutes I was feeling wonderful again... soon I felt like I was literally trembling with energy, and we walked round the park for a few hours, feeling full of joy and love for the world. I felt like everyone in the park was a lovely person that day, and we both felt really close to each other, and kept kissing and hugging.

The flowers and everything else seemed more colourful and bright than usual, but when I bought an ice lolly, it felt lovely and cool but didn't seem to taste of anything, just sweet... We then went home and made love, which was hot and steamy, but I felt slightly more detached than usual. I felt positive and thoughtful for a few more hours, and we talked about our relationship and the feeling we had for each other. Then, about six hours after taking the E, the feelings faded away, so that by the evening I felt totally back to my usual self, though my partner said he still felt buzzy until we went to bed."

What are the physical effects of ecstasy?

The initial physical effects may include tingling sensations on the skin, and nausea and vomiting (especially for new users). But the main physical effects, lasting up to six hours, can be described under six headings:

Eyes: very dilated pupils (called 'saucers' or 'bin-lids'), wide-open eyelids, and shiny eye-whites – and possibly reduced blinking and jerky eye movements.

Mouth: clenched jaw, teeth grinding, lip chewing, and dry mouth and throat.

Muscles: muscular tension (e.g. limbs, face), and trembling or twitching.

Blood/skin: higher blood pressure, higher temperature, hot/cold flushes and sweaty hands.

Heart: faster heartbeat/pulse (100 to 140 bpm, averaging 120 bpm – like dance music).

Genitals: ecstasy use can make the penis shrink and cause erection problems in men.

What are the mental effects of ecstasy?

The ecstasy 'buzz' starts as serotonin suddenly floods the brain, producing a queasy 'rush'. Effects on perception and emotions are more common in the first few hours, while stimulant effects dominate in the second phase ('stacking' extends the first phase of effects). Ecstasy affects the mind in six main ways:

Increased energy and movement: though energised, lack of coordination can occur; and, like speed, ecstasy produces 'stereotypy' – a preference for repetitive actions like dancing.

Disturbances to thinking and memory: reduced ability to concentrate, reason and remember things, and perception of time can be distorted (usually seems faster).

Reduced hunger: hunger is reduced, with mixed effects on thirst (some people get thirstier, others less thirsty).

Heightened perceptions: including brighter colours, greater appreciation of music, and enhanced tactile sensitivity (touch) – though full hallucinations are uncommon (except with MDA).

Intensified mood: notably euphoria and calmness/serenity, while any aggression or anger evaporates – though in rare cases, people may become anxious or emotionally disturbed.

Greater sociability: ecstasy makes people more friendly and empathetic (understanding of others feelings), with some users saying that it boosts feelings of love and/or sexual desire, though it's not really an aphrodisiac. While cannabis also increases sociability toward friends, ecstasy is renowned for increasing friendliness overall – for instance, 'hugging of strangers' is legendary at dance events.

What is the ecstasy comedown?

Ecstasy is unique in having a comedown two or three days after it was used (instead of the same or next day). This is related to how long it takes the brain to recover. It is known as the 'mid-week ecstasy blues', because most users take E at clubs/parties at weekends resulting in comedowns kicking in around Tuesday or Wednesday. The ecstasy blues involve similar symptoms to speed comedowns – sadness, fatigue, headache, hunger, and irritability – but their hallmark is emotional over-sensitivity (e.g. more easily crying, startling, etc.). The ecstasy blues are the norm rather than the exception: about 90% of users in surveys report getting them – typically every time that ecstasy is used. But the E comedown is rarely serious, and is usually over within a day.

Health, harm and unhappiness

Can you overdose on ecstasy?

Yes. Overdose: Although the LD50 (the average lethal dose) for MDMA is about five grams (fifty 100 mg tablets), fatal poisoning can start at around one or two grams (10 to 20 standard tablets) for the most susceptible people.

Serotonin syndrome: is a result of your body releasing too much of the neurotransmitter serotonin. The most severe cases involve interactions of drugs that release serotonin, drugs that prevent the brain reabsorbing serotonin ('serotonin re-uptake inhibitors') and drugs that prevent the breakdown of serotonin (MAOI's). It is thought that PMA may do all three of these things.

The initial signs of MDMA overdose include: rapid pulse (130+ bpm), high temperature (40°C+), rigid arm/leg muscles, breathing trouble, agitated/confused behaviour and totally dilated (large) pupils. The initial signs of serotonin syndrome are similar to an overdose but are known to involve rigid, jerky, twitchy unusual movements, the legs often shaking.

If it gets worse, the person may collapse or have convulsions, after which a number of serious outcomes can develop – such as hyperthermia (see below), heart failure, brain seizures, liver damage, and, in the worst cases, death.

An overdose can kill if it is not dealt with quickly by ringing for an ambulance. If in doubt, ring for an ambulance.

What is hyperthermia?

Hyperthermia, also known as *hyperpyrexia*, is a potentially fatal syndrome involving heatstroke or heat exhaustion. This syndrome has several different contributory factors, including use of drugs which affect body temperature and hydration (ecstasy, speed, etc.), insufficient water intake, wearing heat-retaining clothing, continuous energetic dancing, hot stuffy atmosphere, crowded environment, and individual susceptibility to overheating.

The initial symptoms and signs of it are a very high body temperature ($40^{\circ}\text{C}+$ – obvious to the touch), dehydration (indicated by lack of sweating and confusion), and often unconsciousness (collapse). Ecstasy-related hyperthermia is based on a malfunctioning of the body's temperature control and water balance, and can lead to: the blood clotting and thinning, resulting in bleeding from orifices (nose, eyes, mouth etc.); muscles in the limbs and torso cramping up* (rhabdomyolysis), leading in the worst cases to people bending over backwards into a 'cartwheel' shape; respiratory collapse; liver and kidney impairment; heart failure; and brain seizures, convulsions and/or coma – with about half of all such cases ending in death (about two-thirds of those whose body temperature exceeds 41.5°C die).

* It is important if they have rigid, jerky movements, not to hold people down because of the risk of muscle tissue breaking down (rhabdomyolysis). As with people who have been using volatile substances (solvents) it can also be risky to startle or frighten people as this can lead to heart failure.

Can heatstroke be avoided?

Ecstasy users, who are dancing in hot environments like nightclubs, should be looking to drink about a pint of water or non-alcoholic drinks (alcohol dehydrates you further still) every hour. Sip water rather than drink large amounts in one go, ideally mineral or spring water rather than straight from the tap. Wear layers of clothes and take them off as needed (not all of them unless it is a naked rave) to control your temperature. Hats keep in heat so they should not be worn while you are 'e'ing and dancing. If you feel yourself getting too hot, take a break from dancing and try to get somewhere to rest and cool down, try and splash water on your face or find any method of cooling down. If you feel really hot (skin burning) or feel unwell, faint, stop sweating or have trouble peeing, you should tell security staff (who should be trained in first aid) or any health worker present. Alternatively if you are not in a club, go to the casualty department of your nearest hospital or call an ambulance.

The recovery position

If you are with somebody who collapses and they are unconscious, put them in the recovery position (illustrated) and call for an ambulance. Choking on vomit while laying face down is a common cause of drug death, the recovery position is designed to reduce the chance of this happening.



1

Put the right hand by the head (as if they were waving)

2

Put the left arm across the chest, so that the back of the hand rests against the cheek

3

Hold the hand in place and lift up the left knee

4

Turn them on their side by pushing down on the knee

Will I get into trouble if I call an ambulance?

Paramedics are there to do a job and that job is to save your life. In many areas of the country policies exist that mean the police will not be called in a drug related emergency. Even if you are unsure what the policy is locally, you should always call an ambulance. If the police do arrive, their major concern will be to save your life. You should tell the paramedics what you or your friends have taken as this information could save lives. If you regularly take drugs with friends it is a good idea to discuss what you would do in an emergency and make a pact about how you will look after each other.

Why is drinking too much water dangerous?

Hyponatraemia is the opposite of dehydration, and occurs when people drink too much liquid. This leads to a serious imbalance in the body's water and salt levels, causing confusion and unconsciousness, followed by seizures, convulsions, and sometimes death – typically by cerebral oedema (swelling of the brain). The reasons for excessive drinking include trying to 'come down' from a bad experience, and, in some cases, the direct effects of ecstasy – notably intense thirst, and stereotypy (tendency to repetitive action). Leah Betts, the young woman whose death was used by the mass media to condemn ecstasy as a lethal drug, died of hyponatraemia after drinking excess water while intoxicated by ecstasy.

Does ecstasy cause brain damage?

Claims that ecstasy damages the brain are based on two areas of research. First, some studies have found that the high levels of serotonin and dopamine produced by MDMA-type drugs damage the connecting fibres between brain cells. Serotonin damage can cause mood disorders (e.g. depression) and cognitive problems (e.g. memory deficits), while dopamine damage can cause movement disorders (e.g. Parkinsonism) and psychosis (e.g. paranoia). But what many reports on this research fail to mention is that the brain's connecting fibres can recover from this damage (unlike brain cells). Second, some studies have also concluded that regular MDMA use causes permanent damage to the brain cell itself. But this 'evidence' is largely based on injecting huge doses of MDMA/MDA into animals, or on studies of small samples of poly-drug users, and so is far from conclusive as other studies found no evidence of brain damage in people who had used ecstasy 'moderately' (meaning no more than 50 times) over a long period.

Some experts believe that ecstasy-related brain damage may show up 20 to 30 years later with brain disorders of old age (e.g. Alzheimers, Parkinsonism) kicking in when users reach their 40s or 50s. There are no signs of this yet in the first generation of ravers (who were necking Es almost 20 years ago). In short, claims about ecstasy causing brain damage are not proven – but neither are they unproven, so caution and moderation are the best attitudes to adopt.

What are 'brain shocks'?

In a survey by the dance magazine 'Mixmag', a third of ecstasy users reported 'brain shocks'.

"You've been caning it for a few days. You feel like a badger's bum and right when you're not expecting it, your head is zapped by what feels like an electric shock. You hear a roaring crackling noise in your head and although it's not painful the electronic fizz surges through your barnet..."

Nobody seems to know what they are but some neuroscientists think brain shocks could be a mild epileptic reaction to lack of sleep and too many drugs.

Can ecstasy cause organ damage?

Besides hyperthermia, overdosing or neurotoxicity, use of ecstasy can directly damage body organs and systems – though such cases are rare, and probably involve genetic predispositions. Most cases develop from repeated exposure, but some arise from single episodes, or emerge several weeks after the last ecstasy use. The three main organs affected are the brain, heart and liver.

Can ecstasy harm unborn children?

Although there is presently no evidence of moderate ecstasy use causing harm to unborn or newborn babies, ecstasy should be avoided by pregnant and breast-feeding women until more is known. Recent press reports also suggest that small children who accidentally ingest ecstasy can be killed by fairly low doses (e.g. less than 5 tablets).

What other health problems can ecstasy cause?

Less serious health problems have also been linked to ecstasy, including damage to the teeth and eyes of users, as well as chest pains and respiratory infections. Dental damage is likely to be caused by the side effects of ecstasy, including dry mouth (lack of saliva) and teeth grinding – though the type of damage suggests that jaw clenching is the main cause. By contrast, eye damage is more likely to be caused by over-exposure to air from extended periods awake with wide-open eyes and reduced blinking – and nightclub air is fairly ‘dirty’. Indeed, the nightclub environment (hot, stuffy and crowded) provides ideal conditions for spreading colds and flu – and drug use reduces your resistance to infections. Similarly, chest pains are generally attributable to over-exertion (muscular spasms brought on by prolonged dancing), or in some cases, heavy smoking of tobacco or cannabis whilst on ecstasy.

Is ecstasy addictive?

In general the heaviest users take ecstasy two or three days per week (i.e. all weekend). Daily or near-daily use is very rare although there have been recent reports of daily users in some areas. About half of ecstasy users report some signs of dependence – such as tolerance to the effects, craving and inability to stop using – yet most do not regard themselves as ‘hooked’, and there is no withdrawal syndrome. So while any drug can get to be a habit, ecstasy is not an addictive drug like heroin or alcohol.

Does ecstasy make you moody?

Ecstasy use can bring about neurotic disorders (anxiety, phobias, panic attacks) and mood disorders (depression, mania). Yet such cases are rare, and usually involve poly-drug use, heavy use, and/or a family history of mental illness. These episodes are typically short-term and treatable by GPs. Robbie Williams has blamed his bouts of depression on use of ecstasy – though it could have been the cocaine, alcohol, fame, etc. Persistent anxiety disorders may be treated with a short course of benzodiazepines (e.g. Valium). Continuing depression is often treated with drugs like Prozac. Ecstasy use has also been linked to cases of ‘elevated impulsivity’ and chocolate craving.

Does ecstasy cause psychosis?

Like other drug psychoses, ecstasy psychosis tends to occur in people with a personal or family history of mental illness. Its main symptoms are delusions of persecution (e.g. the police are watching me, aliens abducted me), full-blown hallucinations (hearing and seeing things that aren't there), and 'ideas of reference' (wrongfully thinking that things are linked to you, e.g. the TV newsreader is giving you a secret message). Luckily it is very rare, and nearly all cases recover within a month or two (if they stop taking E) – sometimes including a few weeks of in-patient treatment with anti-psychotic medications like chlorpromazine (Largactil).

Does ecstasy cause memory problems?

What was the question again? In psychology research, ecstasy users do significantly worse on tasks involving working memory – such as recalling lists of words, and switching between mental tasks.

Working memory is located in the pre-frontal cortex – the part of the brain where MDMA-related damage has been alleged to occur. However, it is not clear whether these memory deficits have any significant effects on users' everyday lives.

What are the rules for safer ecstasy use?

The title above says safer ecstasy use – not safe ecstasy use. In short, the only sure way to avoid any harm from ecstasy is not to take it. For people determined to try it, or already using it, the following advice can help reduce the risks and problems identified above to a minimum.

- 1. Do not buy ecstasy from strangers**, and don't carry (possess) more than two or three doses.
- 2. Do your online research and ask friends how strong a new E is before taking it**, but remember people have different reactions to the same dose of the same drug.
- 3. 'Ecstasy testing kits' tell you only whether your pill contains MDMA** not how potent it is or what else is in it.
- 4. Start with a quarter (a half at most) of a pill or a small bump of powder** and wait at least an hour before taking anymore.

- 5. One standard pill per session is enough**, but with potent pills a quarter or half is plenty. Avoid taking repeat doses during a session – but if you do ‘stack’, wait at least an hour and try to keep to quarter or half-tablet boosters.
- 6. Use ecstasy no more than twice a month** – but if using more often, avoid using two days on the run.
- 7. Swallowing E is safest, then sniffing, then smoking** (injectors should seek advice at the local Needle Exchange).
- 8. Eat your last meal at least two hours before you take a pill** to avoid vomiting.
- 9. Sip up to a pint of liquid per hour while on E**, especially if dancing (sports drinks are ideal, mineral/spring water is also good).
- 10. Avoid mixing other drugs with E**, especially alcohol, opiates, and prescription drugs (e.g. beta-blockers).
- 11. Don't encourage others to use E especially, under-18s.** It's your choice to use, respect others if they choose not to use.
- 12. Store E safely** where children cannot reach it, and in a dark, dry, cool, air-tight container, ideally with a lock on it.
- 13. While on E, never drive, use machinery, do risky sports or have children in your care.**
- 14. Never use E if you have serious health problems**, especially heart or respiratory conditions, epilepsy, glaucoma, genito-urinary infections, and mental illness (asthmatics and diabetics should avoid it too).

15. **If using E regularly, take nutritional supplements** – especially tyrosine and tryptophan (found in meat and dairy products, etc.). Make sure that you continue to eat and sleep normally.
16. **Become able to deal with particular ecstasy-related emergencies** in your friends (learning first aid is the best move). If friends get scared /panicky while on E, talk to them calmly and get them to control their breathing. If they start to hyperventilate (breathing very rapidly), get them to breathe in and out of a paper bag if you have one.
17. **You should never accept offers of free drugs / drinks from people you don't know.** It's also best to stay in eye-contact range of at least one friend throughout the night if you are in a club or bar and do not leave your drink on its own in case it is spiked.
18. **Carry condoms even if sex is not planned, and always practice safer sex.** Sexually Transmitted Infections – gonorrhoea, syphilis, chlamydia, herpes, HBV/HCV, HIV/AIDS – are all rising at a rapid rate in Britain, reflecting reduced condom use and more unsafe sex.
19. **If more than a few of your friends are telling you that you are overdoing it, you probably are.** And if you think they're all conspiring against you, you're definitely overdoing it. Stop overdoing it or seek help.

What help is available for people with ecstasy problems?

Ecstasy users with physical health problems usually attend their GP or a hospital casualty department, while those with mental health problems often get counseling at a specialist drug agency, or may get referred to a psychiatrist. Some drug agencies also offer alternative therapies to assist people with ecstasy dependence or problems, including acupuncture and aromatherapy. The phone number and contact details of your local drug agency can be obtained from Frank:

Frank: tel 0800 776600 or www.talktofrank.com



aims

To provide information on the nature and effects of ecstasy and to illustrate the associated dangers including psychological addictive properties; mental health problems; and responding to overdose



audience

Adults and young people engaged in recreational drug use. Use with under 16s with support.



content

Some swearing.



funding

Self-financed.



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