

Ecstasy – understanding the risks

Ecstasy is an illegal drug used by some young people. But unlike some other drugs like marijuana, heroin and cocaine, ecstasy doesn't come from a plant. Instead it's manufactured illegally from a number of different chemicals.

What is ecstasy?

Whilst the ingredients in ecstasy vary, but it's generally made from chemicals similar to two other drug types

- amphetamines (also called speed) - a stimulant which can boost energy and help you stay awake.
- hallucinogens - these can make you see or hear things which aren't there, or distort the way you see or hear things. For example, someone taking hallucinogens, may see a coffee cup move, or think the pattern on the wallpaper is moving.

How is ecstasy used?

It's usually swallowed as a small white or yellow tablet in different shapes or sizes. Some people, however, inject ecstasy.

What are its effects?

Effects vary depending on the drug's ingredients and the person taking it. They include feeling happy, confident and affectionate. But it can also make them feel anxious, paranoid (fearful that others want to harm them) and depressed.

Short term effects can include:

- increased heartbeat and blood pressure
- rise in body temperature and sweating
- dehydration – loss of water in the body
- teeth grinding or jaw clenching
- nausea.

How dangerous is ecstasy?

Some people have died following a bad reaction to ecstasy. Although deaths are not common, it's difficult to predict who is at risk from this drug. Some deaths have been caused by:

- Overheating - the combination of ecstasy with dancing for long periods can raise body temperature, and cause dehydration. Ecstasy users should drink 500ml of water each hour when dancing or moving around, and 250ml each hour if not dancing.
- Drinking too much - it's important not to drink too much water in one go as some deaths have occurred when excess fluid affects the brain, causing a coma.

It 's important not to drive after taking ecstasy and not to use it with other drugs or share needles if injecting. People with a personal or family history of mental illness, anxiety, panic attacks, heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes, liver problems or epilepsy should not use ecstasy.

Is ecstasy addictive?

Ecstasy is not believed to be physically addictive in the same way as heroin or nicotine, for example, which cause withdrawal symptoms when the drug is stopped. There are, however some people who become psychologically dependent on ecstasy – meaning they have difficulty giving the drug up because they feel they need it to enjoy themselves or feel good.

What are ecstasy's long term effects?

There's some evidence that ecstasy can affect the brain, causing depression and anxiety. Relatively few people use the drug for a long time, possibly because the pleasurable effects tend to decrease with prolonged use.

Can you tell if a person is using ecstasy?

Because the effects of ecstasy (and many other drugs) are similar to typical adolescent behaviour (eg mood changes, sleeping in for long periods), it's hard to tell. Parents concerned about a young person's drug use should contact their doctor or community health centre for information about drug and alcohol services in their area.

What if someone becomes ill as a result of using ecstasy or another drug?

If you suspect illness caused by ecstasy, call an ambulance immediately (police don't attend ambulance calls).

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <<http://mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>>.

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.