

Fact Sheet

Ecstasy

What is ecstasy?

Ecstasy is a stimulant drug, which means it speeds up the messages between the brain and the body. Although ecstasy is sometimes described as a mild hallucinogen, it is very rare for a person using ecstasy to hallucinate.

Ecstasy contains methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), although it sometimes contains different drugs such as amphetamine, paramethoxyamphetamine (PMA) and ketamine.

Other common names

Some other common names for ecstasy include: E, XTC, eccy, the love drug and pills.

Effects of ecstasy

The effects of any drug vary from person to person. How ecstasy affects a person depends on many things including their size, weight and health, whether they are accustomed to taking the drug, whether other drugs are present in their body, and the amount taken.

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk and can produce unwanted side effects.

Low to moderate doses

The effects of taking ecstasy may start to be felt within 20 minutes to one hour after an ecstasy pill has been swallowed and may last for approximately six hours. Some of the effects may include:

- › increased confidence and energy, more likely to take risks
- › feelings of wellbeing
- › feelings of closeness to others and empathy
- › paranoia, aggression and psychosis
- › poor muscle control and unsteadiness
- › muscle aches and stiffness
- › increased blood pressure and heart rate
- › nausea and loss of appetite
- › increased body temperature and sweating
- › skin tingles
- › dilated pupils
- › heightened sensations (sight, hearing, touch)
- › jaw clenching and teeth grinding.

Higher doses

A high dose of ecstasy can also cause vomiting,

hallucinations, convulsions (fits). Ecstasy has also been linked to several deaths through heart attack and brain haemorrhage.

Coming down

As the effects of ecstasy begin to wear off, a person may experience a 'coming down' phase with some of the following symptoms:

- › physical exhaustion
- › depression and irritability
- › insomnia
- › anxiety and paranoia
- › difficulty concentrating.

The effects of coming down usually begin the day after taking ecstasy and can last for several days.

Long-term effects

There is some evidence that ecstasy can cause damage to some parts of the brain and that regular, heavy use can lead to depression.

A person who regularly takes ecstasy may find that they are not eating or sleeping enough and are neglecting their health. They may feel 'run down', have reduced energy levels and be at increased risk of colds, flu and infections.

Taking ecstasy with other drugs

The chances of an overdose are increased if ecstasy is taken with other stimulant drugs such as amphetamines or cocaine.

Taking ecstasy with benzodiazepines to help with the symptoms of the 'come down' can lead to a cycle of dependence on both drugs.

Taking ecstasy and drinking alcohol at the same time can lead to dehydration and overheating, and can also increase the negative effects of the 'come down'.

Taking ecstasy while on some antidepressant medication can lead to increased heart rate, loss of coordination, nausea and vomiting.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

Ecstasy can be passed on to an unborn baby through the placenta, or to an infant in breast milk. This could harm the baby and increase the chances of going into labour early.

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Driving

It is dangerous to drive after using ecstasy. The effects of ecstasy, such as over-confidence, can affect driving ability. The symptoms of coming down and withdrawal can also affect a person's ability to drive safely.

Effects on work

Under occupational health and safety legislation, all employees have a responsibility to make sure they look after their own and their co-workers' safety.

The effects of ecstasy such as over-confidence and poor muscle control can affect a person's ability to work safely and effectively. The symptoms of coming down and withdrawal can also affect a person's ability to work well.

Preventing and reducing harms

Ecstasy is commonly taken at dance or 'rave' parties and nightclubs. In these environments, people taking ecstasy may be more likely to engage in energetic dancing which can raise body temperature to dangerous levels. It is therefore advisable to take regular breaks to cool down and drink about 500ml of water per hour.

Drinking too much water while taking ecstasy is also dangerous, as deaths have occurred from dilutional hyponatremia - a condition where a person's brain swells from drinking too much water, inducing a coma.

Tolerance and dependence

There is evidence that ecstasy can be psychologically addictive after prolonged use. People who are psychologically dependent on ecstasy may feel an urge to use it when they are in specific surroundings or socialising with friends.

There is no conclusive evidence that people can become physically dependent on ecstasy.

People who use ecstasy regularly can develop a tolerance to it, which means they need to take larger amounts of ecstasy to get the same effect. However, research suggests that using larger amounts of ecstasy will increase the severity of undesirable effects, rather than increase the pleasurable effects.

Withdrawal

If a dependent person stops taking ecstasy, they may experience withdrawal symptoms. These may start about 12 hours after the last dose.

While severe physical symptoms are uncommon, ecstasy withdrawal can cause problems such as:

- > sleepiness or insomnia
- > cravings
- > anxiety, agitation or restlessness
- > depression
- > loss of concentration
- > aches and pains.

Getting help

If your use of ecstasy is affecting your health, family, relationships, work, school, financial or other life situation, you should seek help.

A good place to start is with your local doctor who is likely to know your medical history. Your doctor can give you information, a referral to a treatment service and ongoing treatment after specialist alcohol and other drug treatment is completed.

Another option is self-referral. Many treatment services allow this and you can contact them directly.

Further information

The DrugInfo website (www.druginfo.adf.org.au) has information on:

- > Support services in your state or territory
- > Treatment options

The Australian Drug Information Network website (www.adin.com.au) has further information about self-referral treatment services.



druginfo.adf.org.au



1300 85 85 84



druginfo@adf.org.au

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These fact sheets
are funded by



Level 12, 607 Bourke Street Melbourne | PO Box 818 North Melbourne Victoria Australia 3051
Phone 03 9611 6100 | Fax 03 8672 5983 | adf@adf.org.au | www.adf.org.au | ABN 66 057 731 192

Authorised and published by the Australian Drug Foundation, 12/607 Bourke Street, Melbourne, 3000.
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