

FACT SHEET TWENTY FOUR

ECSTASY

What is Ecstasy?

The chemical name for Ecstasy is 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine or MDMA for short, it is a stimulant like its relative amphetamine but also has mild hallucinogenic properties reminiscent of LSD. Nicknames for Ecstasy include E, mitsubishis, euro, superman, dollars, hug drug, dolphins, XTC, disco biscuits, pills, burgers, brownies, elephants, sweeties, M and M's, white doves and many others.

It is produced, illegally, as a white powder and is available on the street in tablet, capsule, or as a white powder / crystallised form, this tends to be a stronger, purer form of the drug and is responsible for the majority of Ecstasy induced seizures and overdoses. The tablets and capsules can vary in colour, size, strength and purity, some tablets have pictures or logos on them.

Taking Ecstasy is a gamble, there is no guarantee that the drugs you buy actually contain any MDMA. Tablets have been known to include Ketamin, amphetamine, caffeine, other man made drugs e.g. PMA (Para-MethoxyAmphetamine) and cleaning products. This obviously has implications in terms of the expected and actual drug-induced effects.

Ecstasy is usually taken orally although some people do smoke or snort the powdered form. It is a popular drug on the dance scene because of its stimulant effects and prices range from as little as £2-£7 per tablet. The effects take between 20-60 minutes to start and can last for upto six hours, the come down may last for a couple of days.

The Effects of Ecstasy

Ecstasy is a stimulant, it causes

- Dilation of the pupils and tightening of the jaw muscles
- An increase in heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature
- Sweating
- Dry mouth and throat
- Loss of appetite
- Stimulates the release of an anti-diuretic hormone which reduces the rate of urine production

It gives the user unlimited energy and the ability to stay up and be active all night. It gives people a feeling of calm and users report being more in touch with their feelings, emotions and surroundings, it also makes users more likely to get on with, show affection to and be more in touch with other people.

The Side Effects of Ecstasy

The side effects of Ecstasy can vary greatly due to the strength, amount and purity of the drug, infact it may be another drug altogether. Some users take more because the 'rush' is taking longer than they expected due to varying strength, purity or substance type leading to overdoses. Some Ecstasy tablets contain toxins that cause irreversible damage or even death after one dose.

One of the biggest dangers associated with Ecstasy use is dehydration and overheating. This is due to the drug-induced stimulation of sweating, hyperactivity and increased body temperature combined with the hot atmosphere of a club or pub. Alcohol dehydrates the body further and should be avoided altogether. Over a certain temperature, the blood pressure will plummet, the heart rate increases and convulsions occur. MDMA reacts with chemicals in the blood leading to clotting in vessels of the lungs causing death through respiratory collapse.

It is recommended that people taking Ecstasy wear loose clothing, take regular breaks from dancing to cool down and sip no more than a pint of water per hour. Any more liquid than this may lead to a build up of excessive fluid that cannot be excreted due to the drug-induced reduction in urine production. This leads to a dilution of the salts in the body and a reduction in the sodium concentration allows fluid to seep into the cells and surrounding tissues causing swelling, if this happens in the brain the pressure from the swelling forces the brain tissue down onto the brain stem which controls important body functions such as breathing, resulting in a coma and sometimes death.

Due to the increase in heart rate and blood pressure it is recommended that people with any heart or circulatory problems should avoid Ecstasy altogether.

Other short-term side effects of Ecstasy use include anxiety, panic attacks, paranoia, disorientation and in some cases fitting. After taking Ecstasy individuals may experience withdrawal effects that include poor concentration, mild depression and irritability in the days following their experience and many people need a long period of sleep to fully recover from its effects.

Long-term use may lead to eating disorders, persistent sleep problems, lasting feelings of fatigue and there is also an increased susceptibility to infections due to a weakened immune system. Evidence suggests that continued use may lead to permanent nerve tissue damage which may or may not be related to the memory loss, anxiety, depression and personality changes that have been reported in long-term users.

Users may become psychologically dependant on the stimulant properties of Ecstasy and regular users may develop a tolerance needing to take more of the drug to get the same effects. This increases the risk and the severity of the side effects and withdrawal symptoms, it also means the user is statistically more likely to get a 'bad dose'.

Some users have reported feelings of confusion, anxiety and panic whilst on Ecstasy and have experienced disturbing and upsetting distortions of the senses, these bad experiences may be due to the amount of the drug that is taken and can depend on the individual's state of mind at the time.