

Drug Checking

Policy Position Statement

Key messages:	<p>Drug use is common among young people in Australia.</p> <p>The growth in new psychoactive substances and evolving chemical composition of illicit drugs means users have no way of knowing what they are taking and the potential risks involved, both from the drugs themselves and the unknown variations in purity and dose.</p> <p>Testing of pills by appropriately trained health professionals can inform users about the content and strength/dose, so they can tailor use and thereby minimise the risk of injury or death.</p> <p>International evidence indicates drug checking may reduce drug-related harms, including hospitalisation and death.</p> <p>Australia has trialled sanctioned drug checking at music festivals in Canberra in 2018 and 2019, has established a fixed drug-checking service in Canberra as a pilot, and Queensland recently committing to deliver ongoing drug-checking services.</p> <p>A survey of 2000 Australians in 2019 showed only 22% opposed drug checking at music festivals, with 63% supporting, and the remaining 15% neutral. Young people and festival-goers in Australia strongly support the implementation of drug-checking services</p>
Key policy positions:	<p>PHAA supports supervised pill testing via drug checking services provided by healthcare professionals as an integral part of Australia's harm-minimisation approach to drug use.</p>
Audience:	<p>Federal, state, and territory governments, policy makers, and the general public.</p>
Responsibility:	<p>PHAA's Health Promotion Special Interest Group (SIG)</p>
Date adopted:	<p>September 2024</p>
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Contributors:	<p>Drug Checking: Policy Position Statement [Internet]. Canberra: Public Health Association of Australia; 2017 [updated Sep 2024]. Available from: URL</p>

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The PHAA affirms the following principles:

1. Visits to drug checking sites create an important opportunity for providing support and information over and above the testing itself. This intervention with members of groups known to be at high-risk of use can help to provide appropriate and timely support to reduce the risk of problematic drug use.

PHAA notes the following evidence:

2. Taking illicit drugs is common among people in Australia, highest among young people aged 18-24. In 2022-23, almost one in two (47%, estimated 10.2 million) people aged 14 years and older in Australia have used an illicit drug at some point in their lifetime (including pharmaceutical drugs for non-medical purposes). An estimated 3.9 million (18%) people used an illicit drug in the past 12 months.¹
3. Ecstasy (also known as Methylenedioxymethamphetamine, MDMA) generally causes little reported harm, however, pills sold as ecstasy may contain a range of substances of varying potency including highly toxic substances that are a by-product of MDMA production and additives. The main forms of ecstasy used were capsules (43%).¹
4. The recent National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) reported that 2.1% Australians which equals to 400,000 people used ecstasy in the previous 12 months in 2022-23, which was lower than the prevalence of 3% in 2019. Decrease in recent ecstasy use can be attributed to a disruption in supply and reduced opportunity to use the substance.¹
5. The growth in new psychoactive substances and evolving chemical composition of illicit drugs has increased the potential risks involved for the people using these drugs.
6. Technology exists to test for potentially highly toxic substances. For people intending to take illicit drugs, drug checking – or ‘pill testing’ – by appropriately trained health professionals can inform users about the content and risks of drugs they intend to consume. If consumers’ actions are altered, such as by deciding not to take a specific batch, or to take less of it, or to change the setting, or to spread the dose out over a longer period, or to avoid mixing with other substances, they thereby minimise the risk of injury or death.²
7. Alternatively, consumers who contact drug checking services can gain ongoing knowledge about drug risks, as well as knowledge of health services they might access in the future. Research indicates most people who attend drug checking services associated with festivals do not typically see health professionals about drug issues; drug checking services therefore reach a population not typically connected with relevant health advice and services.³
8. The evaluation report from July 22 to Jan 2023 of the CanTest (the first fixed-site drug checking service in Australia) showed that half of the drugs that were checked were found to contain a substance that was not expected by the person using the service, demonstrating inconsistency in the composition of illicit drugs in the drug market. Over two-thirds (70%) of people using the drug checking service reported that they had not previously sought information or advice from a healthcare professional regarding drug use.³
9. Currently in Australia, there is a lack of accurate information regarding pill contents, and the risks it poses to those who intend to use drugs. A recent trial in the Australian Capital Territory shows that the experience of drug checking, and the accompanying harm reduction interventions, produced a number of positive results in terms of participants' self-reported drug harm reduction knowledge, their trust of

health providers and other written sources of harm reduction information, and stated behavioural intentions regarding drug use.³

10. A study published in 2021 re-confirms previous research findings that people who use ecstasy/MDMA and/or other illegal stimulants are willing to seek out objective information about substance contents.⁴
11. A recent Australian study showed that, among festival-goers surveyed about drug checking scenarios, the existence of a drug checking service (on-site at a festival or in a central fixed-site location) did not increase intention to use ecstasy, for both ecstasy-naive and ecstasy-initiated groups.⁵
12. Drug checking services are now operating in over 26 countries in Europe, the Americas, and Australasia.⁶ A number of countries have government endorsement of drug checking services, including the Netherlands and Canada. In Australia, the ACT Government has supported the approach through CanTEST's free service, standalone drug checking site, with Queensland recently announcing commitment to delivering fixed and settings-based (festival) drug checking services.⁷
13. Summary of relevant research regarding drug checking behaviour identified the following findings:
 - A review by Leece (2017) estimated that 4–76% of those who participated in drug checking intended to discard drugs if testing showed them to be other than expected (depending on type of drug tested).⁸
 - A study by Valente and colleagues⁹ (2019) found significant association between intentions and test results, immediately before and immediately after receiving a result.
 - A systematic review showed that drug checking services influenced behavioural intentions and the behaviour of people who use drugs, particularly when results from drug checking services are unexpected or drugs of concern.¹⁰
14. Implementing this policy would contribute towards achievement of UN Sustainable Development [Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing](#).
15. Implementing fixed, and settings-based drug-checking sites at festivals would align with the priority of reducing adverse health, social, and economic consequences by enhancing harm reduction approaches, particularly though 'settings based approaches to modify risk behaviours'.¹¹

PHAA believes that the following steps should be undertaken:

16. The PHAA supports supervised drug checking as an integral part of Australia's harm-minimisation approach to drug use, and asks that federal, state and territory governments provide support to undertake this life saving initiative.

(Adopted 2017 and revised 2021 & 2024)

References

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