

Drug Checking

Policy Position Statement (formerly titled 'Pill Testing')

Key messages:

Drug use is common among young people in Australia.

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.

This has been compounded by disruptions to, and possible restructuring of, the illicit drug market due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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.

International evidence indicates drug checking may reduce health-related harms, including deaths.

A 2017 catalogue of drug checking services found 31 services were operating in 20 countries worldwide.

Australia has trialled sanctioned drug checking in Canberra in 2018 and 2019.

A survey of 2000 Australians in 2019 showed only 22% opposed drug checking at music festivals, with 63% supporting, and the remaining 15% neutral¹.

Key policy positions:

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.

Audience:

Federal, state, and territory governments, policy makers, and the general public.

Responsibility:

PHAA Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drugs Special Interest Group

Date adopted:

23 September 2021

Drug Checking

Policy Position Statement

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 amongst young people in Australia. A 2019 survey found 9 million people aged 14 and over in Australia (43% of that population) had illicitly used a drug at some point in their lifetime (including pharmaceuticals used for non-medical purposes), and 3.4 million (16% of population) had used one in the last 12 months.²
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.
4. According to AIHW data, in 2019 some 3% of Australians reported having used ecstasy in the previous 12 months (up from 2.2% in 2016). The main forms of ecstasy used were capsules (49%) and pills/tablets (34%).³
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 intent 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.⁴
7. Alternatively or in addition, 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.
8. Accurate information about the content of pills and risks is currently lacking among people using drugs in Australia, posing a serious health risk. There is limited data from Australia on the usefulness of ecstasy pill testing/drug checking as a harm minimisation strategy, however, 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.⁵

9. 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.⁶
10. 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.⁷
11. Drug checking services are now operating in over 20 countries in Europe, the Americas, and Australasia.⁸ 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, but as at September 2021 no other state or territory government has followed that lead.
12. A very recent (2021)⁹ 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).¹⁰
 - A study by Valente and colleagues¹¹ (2019) found significant association between intentions and test results, immediately before and immediately after receiving a result.
 - Reviews by Kerr and Tupper (2017)¹² and by the Danish Health Authority and Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research (2019)¹³ found drug checking service users reported reduced polydrug use, reduced dosage, and the sharing of alerts, test results, and harm reduction advice between friends.
13. Implementing this policy would contribute towards achievement of UN Sustainable Development Goals 3: Good Health and Wellbeing.

PHAA believes that the following steps should be undertaken:

14. 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.

References

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- ² Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020. National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2019. Drug Statistics series no. 32. PHE 270. Canberra AIHW
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Key findings from the 2014 [Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System](https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/resource/key-findings-2014-edrs-drug-trends-conference-handout) (EDRS) - Drug Trends Conference handout. Available at: <https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/resource/key-findings-2014-edrs-drug-trends-conference-handout>
- ⁵ Olsen A, Wong G, McDonald D. (2019). ACT Pill Testing Trial 2019: Program Evaluation. Australian National University: Canberra ACT.
- ⁶ Peacock, A et al Profile and correlates of colorimetric reagent kit use among people who use ecstasy/MDMA and other illegal stimulants in Australia *International Journal of Drug Policy* Vol 97 Nov 2021 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2021.103334>
- ⁷ Murphy S, Bright SJ, Dear G. Could a drug-checking service increase intention to use ecstasy at a festival? *Drug Alc Rev.* 2021. doi:10.1111/dar.13259
- ⁸ Barratt, M.J., Kowalski, M., Maier, L.J., & Ritter, A. (2018). Global review of drug checking services operating in 2017. *Drug Policy Modelling Program Bulletin* No. 24. Sydney, Australia: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.
- ⁹ Measham, F., & Turnbull, G. (2021). Intentions, actions and outcomes: A follow up survey on harm reduction practices after using an English festival drug checking service. *Int J Drug Policy*
- ¹⁰ Leece, P. Evidence brief: Drug checking services as a harm reduction intervention, Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion (Public Health Ontario), Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario (2017)
- ¹¹ Valente, H., Martins, D., *et al.* Evaluation of a drug checking service at a large scale electronic music festival in Portugal, *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 73 (2019), pp. 88-95
- ¹² Kerr, T., & Tupper, K. (2017)., Drug checking as a harm reduction intervention: Evidence Review Report, Vancouver: British Columbia Centre on Substance Use.
- ¹³ Kerr, T., & Tupper, K. (2017)., Drug checking as a harm reduction intervention: Evidence Review Report, Vancouver: British Columbia Centre on Substance Use.