

7. Ecstasy

(2021 version)

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Introduction

The chemical name for ecstasy is Methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA); it is known as a hallucinogenic amphetamine.

The parent drug, MDA (methylenedioxyamphetamine), was synthesised in 1910 and was closely followed by MDMA which went on to be patented in Germany in 1914 as an appetite suppressant but was never actually marketed. During the 1950s, the American military experimented with a whole range of drugs, including ecstasy, for use in chemical warfare, to extract information from prisoners and to immobilise armies. In the 1960s, the drug was rediscovered by an American research chemist, Alexander Shulgin, who experimented with it on himself. During the 1970s it was used by American psychiatrists, who used it in counselling and therapy. In the early 1970s it appeared as a street drug and spread rapidly over the US where it was banned by US legislation in 1985. The drug started to appear in the UK only in the mid-1980s when it became widely known as 'Ecstasy'.

How It Is Taken

Ecstasy comes primarily in tablet or capsule form. The appearance is widely varied coming in many different colours and many have logos, pictures or designs on them, which often inform the street name it is given. The pills are swallowed.



A crystal form of MDMA has appeared on the market. It looks much like crystal methamphetamine. In its purest form crystal ecstasy is strong, requiring very little to get high (200mg). Pure crystal ecstasy is lightly dabbed on the finger and swallowed, or is crushed and snorted. 1/8 of a gram gives roughly 10 dabs.

The street names for ecstasy differ locally and change all the time. Some of the more common names are:

· Ecstasy	· LAX	· E	· Adam
· Eve	· Hug Drug	· Doves	· Disco Biscuit
· XTC	· X	· Big Browns	· Burgers
· California Sunrise	· Disco Burgers	· Love Doves	· New Yorkers
· M25s	· Pink Skuds	· Dennis the Menace	· Clear Caps
· Rhubarb and Custard	· Pink Cadillac		

The hallucinogenic qualities of MDA are stronger than those of MDMA. It is believed that MDA has not been as popular as because the euphoric effects are less pronounced while the stimulant effects are greater. MDA is found in similar forms to MDMA and is probably sold as ecstasy. This may increase the risk for users because of its much more powerful hallucinogenic qualities creating higher risk of bad trips.

Adulterants

Amphetamine can be added to ecstasy as it has similar properties. This combination can, in moderate doses, cause a range of adverse health effects. Other synthetic drugs can be used with ecstasy to improve apparent quality and increase weight. High doses of these added to ecstasy have caused death.

Health

Ecstasy is a stimulant and a hallucinogen. It stimulates, or speeds up, the working of the brain and body. The mind and the body are forced into hyperactivity for an abnormally long time. Because it inhibits the body's normal limits people are able to dance for several hours without the feeling of getting tired.

Although ecstasy is basically an amphetamine (stimulant) it also has hallucinogenic qualities meaning the user may experience a heightening of the perception of colours and sound.

Short-term effects

Depending on how much food the user has in their stomach, they will experience the positive effects first, such as a rush of euphoria, similar to those caused by amphetamines, after 20 to 60 minutes. This is usually followed by several hours of peacefulness and heightened sensual awareness similar to LSD trips, though much milder, and these effects can last for about 3-6 hours. Bad 'trips' associated with ecstasy are very rare although users taking high doses or people who are already feeling anxious can experience paranoia or feeling 'out of it'.

Ecstasy has been called an 'empathogen' and is said to improve trust and communication between friends (the 'hug drug') and appears to increase the individual's self-confidence and self-esteem while inhibitions disappear.

The negative effects of ecstasy on the body are:

- raised heart rate and blood pressure
- tightening of the jaw
- feelings of nausea

- dizziness
- difficulties with bodily co-ordination
- risk of overheating the body (heatstroke)
- dehydration of the body and lack of appetite can cause dangerous weight loss
- over-stimulation (e.g. insomnia)
- 'highs' are usually followed by feelings of fatigue, anxiety and depression
- respiratory distress
- internal bleeding
- kidney failure
- people suffering from epilepsy or who are generally in poor mental or physical condition are especially at risk
- people with already high blood pressure are especially at risk (strokes etc.)
- concern over long-term effects on memory

Some people are particularly susceptible to the stimulant effects which can lead to strokes and heart failure but deaths associated with ecstasy are rare.

Ecstasy users may behave in quite a unique way. As with amphetamine, they may have a lot of energy, which enables them to dance for hours. They are often more sociable than usual, talking to strangers and hugging/touching other people a lot. They can also be paranoid or start to panic for no reason. They may drink a lot of water due to overheating and dehydration.

Many tablets sold as ecstasy are not what purchasers think they are. Some analysed tablets contained no ecstasy but other drugs such as amphetamine or ketamine. Others have been found to contain some ecstasy mixed with a range of drugs or adulterants. Some tablets have been found to be dog-worming tablets. (Drugscope, 2005)

Long-term effects

Regular use of Ecstasy may affect the brain more than the body and can lead to:

- sleep problems
- flashbacks
- lack of energy
- depression or anxiety
- drastic weight loss

There's no evidence so far of permanent depression after using ecstasy. Once people stop taking it their brains recover well (Professor Nutt).

Ecstasy and pregnancy

Ecstasy can cause weight loss, which may stop menstrual periods and the production of eggs. During pregnancy it can also lead to malnutrition of the mother and the baby.

Dependency

Ecstasy is not physically addictive, but people can become psychologically dependent on the feelings of euphoria and calmness that ecstasy gives them

Tolerance

Tolerance builds up in the body, so the user has to take more each time to get the same effects as on previous occasions.

The Law

Ecstasy is a Class A, Schedule 1 drug.

Ecstasy Statistics

Last updated December 2020

Use of ecstasy

The proportion of 16-24-year-olds reporting ecstasy use in the last year was 4%. 10 years ago, this figure was similar as 4.4% of this age group reported using this drug in the last year, but the trend in ecstasy use among young people has fluctuated a good deal over the years. The lowest it has ever been was in 2012/13 at 2.9% and the highest was in 2001/02 at 6.8%.

1.4% of adults aged 16-59 reported using ecstasy in the last year. This is the same as a decade ago when 1.4% of this age group reported using it.

(Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2019/20; British Crime Survey. 2010/11)

Ecstasy and death

Ecstasy was the cause of 78 deaths in England and Wales in 2018. (ONS, 2020)

