



KEEP CANBERRA SAFE

PILL TESTING SAVES LIVES

FAQS

Why are pills prone to contamination?

Party drugs often appear in pill form, making them easy to adulterate and impossible to assess by sight. Australian ecstasy pills are amongst the most dangerous in the world, as found in a review of nearly 27,000 pills conducted in five countries over 10 years. They are highest in 'unknown' ingredients, and highest in the toxic and potentially fatal substance, PMA (para-methoxyamphetamine). From 2000-2004, there were 112 ecstasy-related fatalities, leading health professionals to identify ecstasy toxicity as a clinically significant risk. Six Australians died from drugs at music festivals in 2015, with purity or toxicity believed to be important contributing factors.

How are pills tested?

There are two levels of on-site pill testing: reagent-based testing, which has fewer operational requirements but is more limited in the analyses it can perform, and laboratory-grade testing, which has higher operational requirements, but can perform comprehensive analyses.

The ACT Greens are advocating for laboratory-grade testing, which involves a simple on-site test by medical experts using portable laboratory-grade equipment. This process allows festival-goers to have a pill or pill scraping tested for toxic impurities that will harm or potentially kill them.

While laboratory-grade testing can provide information about the drug itself, it is vital that this information is conveyed by a qualified expert in an appropriate way.

What are the benefits of pill testing?

On-site pill testing allows for detailed information about the composition of a specific drug sample to be provided, so individuals can make a fully informed choice about their drug consumption.

There are positive indications that pill testing minimises risky consumption. In Austria, two-thirds of drug users who were informed by a government-funded pill testing service of potential toxic harms decided not to consume their drugs, and told their friends not to either. In Australia, 76% of participants in a hypothetical study reported they would not take a pill with 'unknown' substances in it.

Pill testing also provides data for public health or law enforcement purposes, as well as an opportunity to reach a population of users that would otherwise be unlikely to engage support services.

How does pill testing improve safety more broadly?

The data gathered from one test can very quickly be used to issue a warning – for example, on festival screens, apps or via announcements – so everyone will know if there is an immediate danger.

What's wrong with DIY pill testing kits?

DIY (reagent-based) testing kits are available online, and are sometimes sold or distributed at events or festivals. Reagent-based testing is limited in the number of potential substances it can conclusively identify, and cannot test for purity. Further limitations include:

- It can give misleading results when there are drug mixtures;
- It provides no information about the non-drug components of a sample; and
- It can be subjective and prone to misinterpretation.

Does pill testing increase drug use or illegal activity?

On-site pill testing has been shown to reduce consumption of potentially unsafe drugs. Users overwhelmingly choose not to consume a drug if alerted to risks related to its

strength or contents.

More broadly, studies have shown the effect of pill testing and monitoring schemes on overall drug use to be neutral—that is, overall use neither increases nor decreases.

How does pill testing work with police enforcement?

Police still target dealers, but also encourage harm reduction by working with pill testing staff to ensure individuals feel safe to have their pills tested. Police already exercise this type of discretion by not targeting people attending drug and alcohol services, or safe injecting rooms, because they understand the benefits they provide.

What is harm reduction?

In essence, ‘harm reduction’ covers any measure that simply decreases the negative consequences of drug use. Harm reduction means that policies, such as pill testing, must be evaluated in terms of their impact on overall drug harm, not in terms of their impact on overall drug use.

What is current Australian drug policy?

Australian drug policy rests on three pillars: supply reduction, demand reduction and harm reduction. The National Drug Strategy (NDS) attributes equal importance to all pillars. At present, law enforcement receives the most resources. In 2013, law enforcement spending was at 64%, treatment was at 22%, prevention was at 9.6%, and harm reduction was at 2.2%.

Why is prohibiting drugs more dangerous than focusing on reducing harm?

Apart from the harmful effects of the drugs themselves, the unregulated and untested nature of the market means that illicit drugs are prone to adulteration or contamination. Specifically, three risks arise from the illicit production of drugs:

1. Contamination during production;
2. Adulteration with cheap, imitation, bulking or cutting agents; and

3. Excessively strong or pure dosages.

Why don't sniffer dogs work?

Current policy in relation to party drugs prioritises deterrence, primarily through the use of sniffer dogs, or Passive Alert Detection (PAD) dogs. The dog squad aims to reduce drug use at music events by identifying patrons in possession of drugs and by acting as a visible deterrent presence.

First, the dogs have a low success rate for detecting drugs. The NSW Ombudsman in 2006 found that dog identifications were successful 26% of the time. A study by the Ecstasy and related-Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) from 2008-10 found that, of those surveyed who admitted to possessing drugs when they were searched by the dogs, 7% were identified. It is not clear that PAD dogs do have a deterrent effect. In 2006, the EDRS assessed the effect of drug detection dogs on NSW ecstasy users. Half attempted to conceal their drugs (51%); 19% consumed their drugs before coming to the festival and 12% avoided the dogs. Only 4% of users reported disposing of their drugs.

The PAD dog program can also be harmful. Panic upon seeing the dogs can often lead people to consume all their drugs at once, putting them at risk of overdose. In 2013, 23-year-old James Munro died for exactly this reason at Sydney's Defqon.1 festival. Further risks arise when people try to conceal their drugs from the dogs in body cavities: this can cause bowel obstruction, gastrointestinal perforation, or accidental absorption leading to overdose.

Source: [A Pill Too Hard To Swallow?](#) Report prepared for Colleen Hartland MP, Greens MP for the Western Metropolitan Region Greens Spokesperson for Health By Zvi Gabriel Lefkovits, 10 June 2016.