

Ecstasy

Ecstasy is the common name for the illegal synthetic drug called methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). It is both a stimulant and a hallucinogen, since it speeds up the workings of the central nervous system and alters the user's perception of reality. Ecstasy is commonly used as a mood enhancer at parties and nightclubs. In high doses, ecstasy can cause seizures, vomiting or death.

Common slang terms include the 'love drug', 'E' and 'eckies'. Ecstasy effects begin in around an hour and might last for up to 32 hours.

How ecstasy is used

MDMA was originally developed in Germany. Today ecstasy is generally made in illegal laboratories, which means the person taking it has no idea if the dose will be strong or weak, or even if it will contain any MDMA at all. It is possible for ecstasy tablets to contain little or no MDMA. They may contain other chemicals such as amphetamines, PMA or ketamine that may have unexpected or dangerous effects.

Ecstasy is usually swallowed as a tablet, but it can also come in powder form.

How ecstasy works

When we are stressed or under threat, the central nervous system readies us for physical action by creating particular physiological changes. These may include the release of adrenalin and other stress hormones. Key functions like heart rate and blood pressure may increase, redirecting blood flow into the muscles and away from the gut.

As a nervous system stimulant, ecstasy works by prompting the brain to initiate this 'fight or flight' response and the user feels refreshed by a burst of energy. Ecstasy's hallucinogenic properties distort the user's experience of reality by triggering hallucinations of both sight and sound.

Ecstasy is renowned for the feelings of peace and love it invokes. This could be caused by an elevation in particular brain chemicals, or neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and dopamine. Coming down from ecstasy is an unpleasant experience. Symptoms can include fatigue, aching muscles and depression.

Common effects of ecstasy

The effects of ecstasy depend on the strength of the dose and on the physical make-up and state of mind of the person taking the drug. Generally, some of the immediate effects of ecstasy include:

- Feelings of confidence, happiness and benevolence
- Accelerated heart rate and breathing
- Rise in blood pressure
- Sweating and dehydration
- Nausea
- Jaw clenching and teeth grinding
- Loss of appetite
- Hallucinations
- An increased urge for sex
- Loss of inhibitions.

The symptoms of ecstasy overdose

In high doses, ecstasy can cause seizures and vomiting. The symptoms of overdose include a sharp rise in body temperature and blood pressure, dizziness, cramps, heart palpitations and vomiting. People with certain disorders – such as epilepsy, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease or mood or psychiatric disorders – are at greater risk of harm if they take ecstasy.

Ecstasy can also cause death in a number of ways, including:

- Cardiac arrest
- Stroke
- Kidney failure
- Overheating (hyperthermia) and dehydration
- Dilutional hyponatremia, when the user 'drowns' their brain by drinking too much water.

In an emergency, call for help

If someone you are with overdoses or has an adverse reaction while using ecstasy, dial triple zero (000) to call an ambulance immediately. A quick response can save the person's life. Don't delay because you think you or your friend might get into trouble. Ambulance officers are not obliged to call the police. Stay with the person until the ambulance arrives and tell the ambulance officers as much as you can about what drugs were taken, how long ago and any pre-existing medical conditions the person may have.

Dependence, tolerance and withdrawal

It is unknown whether ecstasy is physically addictive or not. Many users say that it is hard to stop taking the drug and this might indicate that it is possible to become psychologically dependent. Like many other drugs, a user can build up a tolerance to ecstasy. This means they want to take larger and larger doses to try and achieve the same effect. However, this tends to increase the intensity of the unpleasant side effects instead.

Damage caused by long-term ecstasy use

There has been little research on the long-term health hazards of taking ecstasy. Studies suggest that some of the problems may include:

- Permanent damage to the brain cells that make the neurotransmitter serotonin, which is involved in mood regulation, body temperature, appetite and sex drive
- Liver damage
- Delusions
- Panic attacks
- Depression
- Risk of HIV, hepatitis infection, blood poisoning or skin abscesses if ecstasy in powder form is injected using shared needles
- Hallucinogenic flashbacks that can occur weeks, months or even years after taking the drug
- Susceptibility to having unprotected sex, which increases the risk of contracting sexually transmissible infections (STIs)
- The need to use other drugs to balance the side effects of ecstasy.

Liquid ecstasy is different to ecstasy

The drug known as 'liquid ecstasy' is a different drug to ecstasy. Liquid ecstasy is gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB): also known as grievous bodily harm (GBH) or fantasy. Unlike ecstasy, GHB is a depressant drug that has sedative and anaesthetic effects.

Type of help available

Treatment options for drug dependence include detoxification, individual counselling and group therapy. See your doctor for information and referral, or contact an alcohol and other drug service in your area.

Where to get help

- If an overdose is suspected, call an ambulance immediately. Dial triple zero (000)
- Your doctor
- DrugInfo Clearinghouse Tel. 1300 858 584 – for information
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral
- YSASline Tel. 1800 014 446 – for information, counselling and referral to youth-specific alcohol and other drug services
- Family Drug Help Tel. 1300 660 068

Things to remember

- Ecstasy is an illegal synthetic drug that is both a nervous system stimulant and a hallucinogen.

- In high doses, ecstasy can cause seizures and vomiting.
- Ecstasy can also cause death as a result of heart attack, stroke, overheating or if a person drinks too much water.
- In an emergency, dial triple zero (000) to call an ambulance. Plan ahead what you would do in an emergency and don't delay seeking help because you think you or your friend might get into trouble.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Drug Foundation

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