

# Drug safety testing at festivals and night clubs



## Key points

- More than one in eight regular night clubbers (12%) in the UK have used ecstasy in the past year, with as many as a third of attendees using ecstasy at large electronic dance music (EDM) clubs and festivals on a given night.
- Deaths related to ecstasy use in England and Wales have risen from 10 in 2010 to 57 in 2015, with drug-related deaths at festivals also increasing to six at UK festivals in 2016.
- Drug safety testing pilots at two UK festivals in 2016 saw almost one in five users (18%) dispose of their drugs once aware of the content.
- 95% of festival-goers and 90% of night clubbers support the introduction of drug safety testing facilities, and 97% and 96% respectively of those who use drugs say they would consider using the facilities themselves, if available.
- A third (32%) of festival-goers and three in 10 night clubbers (30%) say they would definitely or probably not take their drugs if testing revealed the content was not what they expected (strength or composition), while 45% and 46% said they would take less or be more careful.
- RSPH supports the roll out of drug safety testing facilities as standard in the UK across all festivals, city centre nightlife areas in the UK and as a client service at drug treatment services.

## Background

As outlined in the Royal Society for Public Health (RSPH)'s drug policy report *Taking a New Line on Drugs* in 2016, rates of health harm associated with the use of illegal drugs in the UK are on the rise<sup>1</sup>. The annual number of deaths from illegal drug use in England and Wales is more than twice that of 20 years ago<sup>2</sup>, and the UK now has a drug-related death rate which is almost three times greater than the European average<sup>3</sup>.

The majority of deaths are associated with the use of opioids such as heroin, for which the rate of fatalities is escalating as an aging cohort of dependent users develops an increasingly complex set of associated medical conditions and needs<sup>4</sup>.

However, recreational use of stimulant 'club drugs' has not been immune from the overall rise in harm.

Ecstasy (MDMA), known to be the drug with the highest prevalence of use in dance club settings<sup>5</sup>, has seen related deaths in England and Wales rise from 10 in 2010 to 57 in 2015<sup>6</sup>. Deaths related to any drug at UK festivals specifically increased to six in 2016. High profile media coverage of recent deaths, such as those at Fabric<sup>7</sup> and T in the Park<sup>8</sup>, has heightened public and entertainment industry sensitivity to the issue.

This increase in harm is thought to be at least partly associated with a general increase in the strength of ecstasy pills circulating in the European market. The average MDMA content of an ecstasy pill in Europe is now around 125mg per tablet, compared to 50-80mg in the 1990s and 2000s, with some 'super pills' now containing more than 300mg of MDMA<sup>9</sup>.

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While no level of use of ecstasy or other 'club drugs' is entirely safe, the result of this increase in strength is that users may now be unwittingly taking them in concentrations far more likely to cause serious harm, based on quantities taken in years when the strength was lower. In addition, there remains a credible threat to health from the presence of toxic substances such as para-methoxymethamphetamine (PMMA), which have been linked to a number of deaths and which are sometimes mis-sold as MDMA or used as adulterants<sup>10</sup>.

It is estimated that more than one in eight regular night clubbers (12%) in the UK have used ecstasy in the past year<sup>11</sup>, with as many as a third of attendees using ecstasy at large electronic dance music (EDM) clubs and festivals on a given night<sup>12</sup>. This compares with 1.5% of the general UK adult population who report taking ecstasy in the past year<sup>13</sup>. Use is most common in the 16-24 age

group (4.5%<sup>14</sup>) who constitute the largest group of attendees (38%<sup>15</sup>) at festivals.

While the reasons for the use of, and harm from, opioid drugs such as heroin are usually related to deep-seated and complex socio-economic factors, and most frequently associated with particular marginalised demographics, the use of 'club drugs' such as ecstasy is typically more casual, opportunistic, hedonistic and non-dependent, and spread across a broader range of social demographics. This suggests the application of educational and awareness-raising interventions may have the potential to be more effective at reducing harm from these substances than from those associated with more dependent use.

## Multi Agency Safety Testing (MAST)

Given that a large degree of health harm associated with 'club drugs' stems from user ignorance of the exact strength and content of pills and powders of uncertain provenance, any measures that increase our knowledge base can be expected to have a positive effect on reducing harm – especially if the provision of such information creates an opportunity to impart information on safer behaviours and risk reduction to the key target population. If drug users can be reasonably sure of what they are actually taking, then they will be better placed to make informed decisions about if and how to take these substances, and so are less likely to have an adverse reaction or overdose as a result.

One way of providing this clarity (without establishing a legal market) is by providing facilities in the setting of use where users can have substances forensically tested to establish their content and potency, and receive tailored harm reduction advice appropriate to their test results.

While substances taken from seizures and amnesty bins at festivals and night clubs have for a number of years been tested 'back of house' to help inform law enforcement and to a lesser extent health professionals on-site, 'front of house' forensic testing provided as a service directly to individual service users is a new initiative to the UK. Also referred to as Multi Agency Safety Testing (MAST), this concept was piloted for the first time in the UK at two festivals (Secret Garden Party and Kendal Calling) in summer 2016.

MAST was introduced to the UK by The Loop<sup>16</sup>, a not-for-profit community interest company, with the agreement and support of local police, public health, local authorities and events management. The service allows users to drop a small sample of a 'substance of concern' in an amnesty bin for testing. Results are then delivered (about 30 minutes later) as part of an individually tailored 15 minute harm reduction intervention by an experienced substance misuse practitioner – without fear of arrest or confiscation.

The testing process itself uses four different analytical methods including Fourier Transform Infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy (linked to a computer database of all known legal and illegal substances), UV spectroscopy, a number of reagent tests, and wet chemistry. Most or all of the sample is destroyed in the testing process (no drugs are returned to the service user), with any remnants collected and destroyed later by the police. Finally, service users are offered the opportunity to have any other substances of concern in their possession disposed of.

Initial results from the pilots suggest almost one in five users (18%) opted to have their drugs destroyed, immediately reducing the prevalence of potentially more harmful substances circulating on site<sup>17</sup>. All service users leave the MAST intervention equipped with a greater understanding of how to minimise the risk of serious health harm, such as by only taking half or quarter pills and waiting for at least two hours before taking any more. The critical importance of this awareness is illustrated by the more than 10-fold variation in strength (from 20mg to 250mg MDMA content) of ecstasy pills tested on any given day during the pilots<sup>18</sup>.



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Following the success of the pilots, it is expected that The Loop will provide MAST at around eight UK festivals in the summer of 2017, reaching up to half a million festival-goers. This will potentially include both independent festivals (with Secret Garden Party, Kendal Calling and Boomtown all confirmed), and major mainstream festivals such as Reading and Leeds run by the Festival Republic group. Plans are in place to pilot testing facilities in UK city centres in the near future, and The Loop has also supported the planned launch of forensic testing for service users at Copenhagen's new drug consumption room.

A survey of more than 1,300 UK festival-goers and more than 1,300 night clubbers carried out by RSPH in May 2017 suggests that the take-up and impact of these extended facilities will be strong<sup>19</sup>:

- 95% of festival-goers and 90% of night clubbers support the introduction of drug safety testing facilities, and 97% and 96% respectively of those who use drugs say they would consider using the facilities themselves, if available.
- A third (32%) of festival-goers and three in 10 night clubbers (30%) say they would definitely or probably not take their drugs if testing revealed the content was not what they expected (strength or composition), while 45% and 46% said they would take less or be more careful.

This tallies with the results of a survey of users of a similar drug testing service ('checkit!') already in existence in Austria, of whom one in five (21%) said they would not take their ecstasy pills if testing revealed a high dosage of MDMA, while two in five (39%) said they would not take them if they contained an unexpected substance<sup>20</sup>.

## What is RSPH calling for?

RSPH views drug safety testing as a pragmatic harm reduction measure, and advocates that it should become a standard feature of places where drug use is prevalent such as city centre nightlife areas and festivals. We recommend the following to make this a reality:

- Drug safety testing facilities to be rolled out at all UK festivals using the model successfully piloted by The Loop. This should be done within an agreed framework such as 'Prevent, Pursue, Protect' used at Kendal Calling, whereby efforts are still taken to prevent illegal substances entering the festival site and dealers are still pursued, but with an acceptance that drug taking will inevitably still occur, that the general public (including drug users) need protection, and that a harm-reduction safety net must be provided.
- Further pilots to be carried out to establish the most effective and cost-efficient way of providing the same facilities in city-centre nightlife areas, for instance via a central hub servicing all night clubs in a given area.
- National best practice guidelines to be developed, with input from police and public health authorities across the UK, so events or local authorities providing the service do so responsibly and in line with latest evidence of effectiveness.
- A formal training and accreditation scheme for service providers (such as that being developed by The Loop) to be a condition of on-site service delivery, in order to ensure that these organisations provide the service in a responsible, ethical and evidence-based manner, and that the individuals working for them are equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge.
- The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) to issue guidance giving local police forces the clearance and confidence to facilitate the implantation of MAST.
- Local public health teams to publicly support the implementation of MAST at festivals, in city centre nightspots and in drug treatment services within their areas, and to support in awareness-raising around their use.



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## References

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16. For more information about The Loop please see: [www.wearetheloop.org](http://www.wearetheloop.org).
17. Measham, F. 2017. *Introducing Multi Agency Safety Testing: Exploring the potential public health benefits from on-site drug safety testing piloted at a UK festival*. Manuscript submitted for publication.
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