

Ecstasy

AKA: MDMA, 3-4 Methylenedioxy-n-methylamphetamine, *Tabs, Pills, E's, Eccies, E, XTC*

Branded Tablets including: *apples, doves, killers, mitsubishis, ferraris, crowns, Euros, motorolas, VWs* and numerous others

Ecstasy was originally the 'street' name for the compound 3-4 Methylenedioxy-n-methylamphetamine (MDMA). MDMA is part of a large group of drugs - the Phenylethylamines (which relates to their core molecular structure). Related products include MDA, MDE, MBD, DOM. Several hundred phenylethylamines have been synthesised.

SOURCE: Ecstasy is derived from naturally occurring chemicals found in trees *Sassafras Albidum*, or *Ocotea Pretiosa*. While the processes involved are well documented, they are beyond the means of most amateur chemists, requiring both equipment and chemicals that are expensive or subject to licence. UK-bought Ecstasy is produced both in the UK and mainland Europe, in illegal laboratories.

APPEARANCE: Pure MDMA comes as a white powder. However, due to the number of different labs and different processes that produce Ecstasy, appearance is very varied. Most commonly, Ecstasy comes as tablets or capsules. Ecstasy is also supplied as a powder, in wraps or bags. Tablets may be white, off white, yellow, speckled, rough, smooth, scored, imprinted with designs or plain.

Capsules come in many colours, including plain white, black and red, yellow and purple. The appearance of tablets or capsules often gives rise to their names; tablets imprinted with pictures of apples are called APPLES, those imprinted with doves were called DOVES and so on. This sort of branding, initially designed to make good E's distinguishable from bad ones, is no guide to quality. Once a brand is established, other producers copy the design, but may not copy the content.

COSTS: Ecstasy was initially a relatively expensive drug in the UK, selling for between £10-20 per tablet. But over the past few years, cost has dropped massively, with most tablets selling for £1-2 or less. MDMA powder can be more expensive, selling at between £30-50/gm.

QUALITY: The quality of all drugs is variable and nowhere is this truer than with Ecstasy. Ecstasy users were always at risk of buying low quality tablets. However, as cost dropped, so has quality and so pills now often contain little or no MDMA. Some will contain other psychoactive substances there is a chance that any old tablet finds its way onto the streets - headache tablets, other medications, veterinary supplies, old capsules filled with any white powder. Stories are rife of dog worming tablets being sold, or capsules full of ground glass being flogged, but these are generally urban myths.

Even if the tablet or capsule contains a genuine illegal, psychoactive drug, it may not be true Ecstasy. Combinations of speed, Acid, heroin, tranquillisers, Ketamine, and other drugs have been passed off as Ecstasy. And even, should the drug be an Ecstasy-related compound, it is as likely to be MDEA, MDA or some other variant as it is to be true Ecstasy (MDMA).

Increasingly, those who want good-quality MDMA will try and source MDMA powder, and many will steer clear of pills.

At one stage, there were reasonably reliable sites with UK-specific Ecstasy purity reports. However, few of these sites are adequately maintained or moderated and so are not a reliable indicator of UK ecstasy quality.

METHODS OF USE: Ecstasy is usually swallowed, though it is theoretically injectable. MDMA powder is often snorted. Pills and powders have also been used rectally.

EFFECTS: Ecstasy starts working approximately half-an-hour after it has been swallowed. Users may initially experience a warm glow spreading rapidly through the body, and experience some slight dizziness, disorientation, breathlessness and exhilaration. Nausea may be present.

For the next 3-5 hours, or possibly slightly longer, the user may experience some of the following: sense of wellbeing and contentment, intense happiness, increase in pulse-rate, feeling warm or flushed, feeling restless, anxiety and paranoia, feeling increasingly friendly to other people, and a sense that this friendliness is reciprocated, tightness and clenching of the jaw muscles, dilated pupils, an increase in energy, suppression of the appetite and no desire to sleep, enhanced appreciation of visual and auditory stimulation, some mild visual distortion, a decreased desire to urinate.

Of course, any individuals experience of Ecstasy depends on the strength and quality of the drug, and the users mood and environment. In some settings, such as when Ecstasy is used to explore self-awareness, the restlessness and anxiety is less pronounced. The cumulative effect of Ecstasy, especially when seen in the context of club drugs, is of increased appreciation of music and light shows, the energy to dance all night, and a sense of unity and friendship with other clubbers.

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS: Much has been made of the health risks attached to Ecstasy use, especially of Ecstasy-related deaths. While much research is still on going, the following health risks are apparent:

- toxic or allergic reactions to Ecstasy itself; some people are sensitive or allergic to Ecstasy; such sensitivity can result in illness or death.
- a toxic or allergic reaction to substances that have been sold in place of Ecstasy; this includes reactions to both similar substances (e.g. MDA) but also to other substances such as penicillin or other substances.
- injury or fatality caused by the effects of Ecstasy; examples include people with heart conditions who have heart-attacks as a result of taking Ecstasy.

- Heat-stroke: a risk especially when Ecstasy is taken in a hot night-club, especially if the user is dancing a lot. Heatstroke can cause death as internal organs cease working.
- water intoxication; in an attempt to reduce the risks of heat-stroke, a user may drink lots of water. The combination of drinking too much water and restricted kidney function due to Ecstasy can cause levels of fluid within the brain to increase, leading to unconsciousness, coma, and possible death.
- the triggering of other conditions: Ecstasy has been linked to a number of conditions which may have previously been latent, and triggered by taking Ecstasy. Evidence is strong, for example, that Ecstasy can trigger Epilepsy in some individuals.
- long-term psychiatric damage: some users have experienced long-term depression after using Ecstasy; this is more common in regular users. There is some evidence that ecstasy use, especially long-term use, adversely affects neurotransmitter transmission systems in the brain.
- long-term damage to internal organs has not been discounted; organs considered, by some, to be at risk include the liver, the kidneys, the heart and the brain.

LEGAL STATUS: Ecstasy is a Class A, Schedule 1 drug, and currently has no medical or therapeutic use in this country.

OTHER INFORMATION: Ecstasy is erroneously described as a new drug, but it was first produced as long ago as the 1930s. Having been used as an appetite suppressant, and a military brainwashing drug, Ecstasy experienced a renaissance in the sixties and seventies as a tool for psychotherapy, and then made the jump into the club scene. It was only made illegal in the USA in 1985, though had been illegal in the UK far longer.

Alexander Shulgin is credited with "rediscovering" MDMA and synthesised this along with many other phenylethylamines. His accounts of this and other drug manufacture and sampling in his book *Pikhal* and its sequel *Tikhal* brought awareness of the compounds and their manufacture to a wider audience.

MDMA was initially popular in the US Gay club scene, in the early '80s came back to the UK and whilst initially primarily popular in the UK Gay music scene, rapidly spread to other club-goers, fusing with the emergent Acid House scene. It rapidly increased in popularity across many music scenes, including the rave and free party scenes, the Manchester music scene and then on in to other cultural settings.

Some commentators dubbed 1988 the Second Summer of Love, and for the next two or three years Ecstasy maintained high levels of popularity.

Things started to change around the time of the Castlemorton Free Festival (1992) and went in to decline as legislation and enforcement impacted both on the rave/festival scene and the manufacture of MDMA.

The golden-age of Ecstasy seems to be on the wane, as some users, concerned about over-priced drugs of disputable quality, have turned to other products such as low-priced cocaine instead.