



**UNSW**  
AUSTRALIA

## The 2016 EDRS key findings: A survey of people who regularly use psychostimulant drugs.

Authors: Jennifer Stafford, Rachel Sutherland, Lucinda Burns and Courtney Breen  
National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Australia

Medicine

National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre

### KEY FINDINGS

- 795 regular psychostimulant users (RPU) took part in face-to-face EDRS interviews in 2016. Participants were primarily recruited through the internet (58%) and word of mouth (30%).
- Ecstasy was the drug of choice nominated by over a third of the sample (36%) followed by cannabis (21%).
- The most popular form of ecstasy consumed regularly was pill (tablet) form. There remains an increasing trend in the use of MDMA crystal/rock which is considered to be a more potent form of ecstasy. Over half (54%) of MDMA crystal/rock users reported it being of 'high' purity compared to 25% of those reporting pills, powder and caps as 'high'.
- A quarter of the national sample reported 'weekly or more' use of ecstasy.
- Ecstasy was used in a range of public and private locations. Almost half (44%) of RPU nominated nightclubs as the last location they used ecstasy while intoxicated.
- The price of ecstasy remained stable at \$25 per tablet.
- The recent use of methamphetamine (all forms) remained stable with 38% of the sample reporting recent use. Speed powder remained the form used most (25%) followed by crystal (19%).
- Reported availability of methamphetamine varied by form. Over half the sample reported speed powder to be 'easy' or 'very easy', equal proportions reported base as 'easy', 'very easy' or 'difficult' to obtain. Almost two-thirds reported crystal as 'very easy' to obtain.
- Forty-two percent of the sample reported speed powder to be of 'medium' purity. Crystal (50%) and base (45%) were reported to be of 'high' purity.
- The recent use of new psychoactive substances (NPS) remained stable with about a third (34%) of the sample reporting recent NPS use. The most commonly reported NPS were: DMT (15%) and any 2C (13%). Frequency of use was low. Synthetic cannabis use was reported at low levels (4%).
- Nationally about half (47%) of the sample reported recent use of cocaine. Frequency of use was low.
- The recent use of cannabis remained high (86%) and stable. About a fifth of the sample reported daily cannabis use.
- Recent use of LSD, ketamine and GHB significantly increased between 2015 and 2016, with variation across jurisdictions. The frequency of use remains sporadic for all these drugs.
- There were significant increases in recent use of: nitrous oxide (25% in 2015 vs. 36% in 2016), amyl nitrate (21% in 2015 vs. 27% in 2016), benzodiazepines (32% in 2015 vs. 38% in 2016) and other opiates (14% in 2015 vs. 21% in 2016).
- The recent use of e-cigarettes significantly decreased (34% in 2015 and 26% in 2016).
- Alcohol is the second most commonly used drug among this group with 97% reporting recent use on a median of 48 days (twice weekly).
- About a fifth of the national sample (18%) reported ever having purchased a drug online with 14% reporting purchasing online in the past year.

### INTRODUCTION

The Ecstasy and related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) reports details of ecstasy and related drug markets in Australia. The EDRS monitors the price, purity and availability of 'ecstasy' (MDMA) and other related drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine, GHB, ketamine and more recently new psychoactive substances (NPS). It also examines trends in the use and harms of these drugs. The data collection includes: a) surveys with regular psychostimulant users (RPU); b) surveys with key experts who have contact with RPU through the nature of their work; and c) the analysis of existing data sources that contain information on ecstasy and other drugs.

This bulletin contains a summary of the key findings from the RPU survey component of the 2016 national EDRS. Participants in 2016 were recruited primarily from the internet (58% - mainly Facebook) followed by word of mouth (30%).

Further details, including key expert and indicator data, will be published in the national and jurisdictional EDRS Drug Trends annual reports, which will be available through NDARC in early 2017. Previous years' findings are available in national and jurisdictional reports on the Drug Trends website ([www.drugtrends.org.au](http://www.drugtrends.org.au)).

### Notes on interpretation

- 'Recent use' data in this bulletin refers to the proportion of participants who had used the drug on at least one occasion in the last six months;
- 'Frequency' data refers to the number of days on which those participants had recently used the drug;
- 'Lifetime' refers to ever having used a drug;
- ↑ Significant increase ( $p < 0.05$ ) from previous year (2015) compared with current year (2016);
- ↓ Significant decrease ( $p < 0.05$ ) from previous year (2015) compared with current year (2016).

## NATIONAL OVERVIEW

### Demographics

In 2016, EDRS demographic characteristics remained generally consistent across jurisdictions and were similar to those collected in previous years. The mean age of participants was 23 years and almost two-thirds were male (61%). The majority of participants were from an English speaking background (96%) and heterosexual (88%), while over half were single (56%).

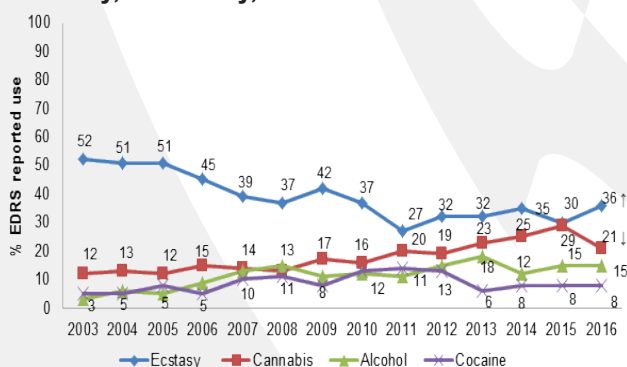
Two-fifths (44%) were tertiary educated, with half reporting either full (24%) or part-time employment (24%). The main source of income for this sample was wages or salary (66%) followed by government benefits (19%) and parental allowance (8%). Mean weekly income was \$588 with variations across jurisdictions. In terms of accommodation, most reported renting (51%) or living in the family home (41%). As in previous years, only a small percentage (2%) reported being in drug treatment, mainly drug counselling.

### Drug use patterns

The preference for ecstasy as the drug of choice (i.e. preferred drug) significantly increased from 30% in 2015 to 36% in 2016. There was a corresponding significant decrease for cannabis (21% vs. 29% in 2015) (Figure 1). Alcohol and cocaine remain at stable levels in relation to preference. The drug used most often in the last month was alcohol (35%) followed by cannabis (33%) and ecstasy (20%).

Nationally, over one-third (36%) of the participants reported bingeing (use for more than 48 hours continuously without sleep) on any stimulant in the last six months. The main drugs reported in a binge session were ecstasy, alcohol and cannabis.

**Figure 1: Drug of choice among EDRS participants, nationally, nationally, 2003-2016**



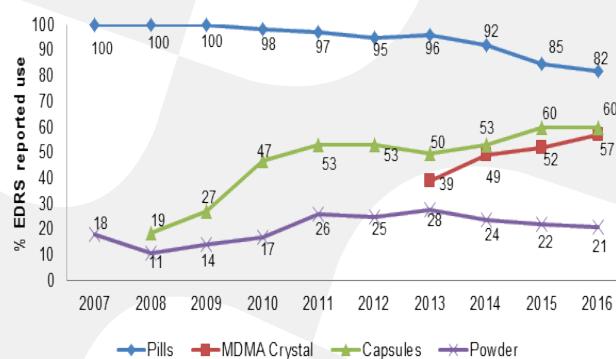
Source: EDRS participant interviews

## Ecstasy

### Recent use

Nationally, the majority of participants reported the use of ecstasy pills (82%) followed by capsules (60%) and MDMA crystals/rock (57%). A fifth (21%) reported the recent use of ecstasy powder (Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Forms of ecstasy used, nationally, 2007-2016**



Source: EDRS participant interviews

Note: Data collection for capsules started in 2008 and MDMA crystal in 2013.

Ecstasy in all its forms (pills, powder, capsules and MDMA crystals/rock) was used on a median of 13 days in the six months prior to interview (approximately once per fortnight; range 1-180 days). This remained stable from 2015, with most reporting use between weekly to monthly (60%). Participants reported using a median of two ecstasy pills in a typical session, of which nearly one-third (29%) reported use of more than two pills in a typical session. In terms of the average amount used in a session for 'other forms' of ecstasy use, participants reported using a median of two capsules (range 1-10 capsules) and two capsules of MDMA crystals/rock (range 0.1-9 crystal capsules) in a typical session.

### Market characteristics

#### Ecstasy pills, capsules and powder

The national price of ecstasy pills remained consistent with previous years at \$25 per pill. The price paid per gram of ecstasy powder nationally was \$200. In terms of price changes for pills, powder and capsules, the highest proportion of participants reported the price was stable (61%).

In relation to purity, results were stable from 2015 with 14% reporting that it was 'low', 33% reporting that it was 'medium', 25% reporting that it was 'high' and 29% reporting that it 'fluctuated'. The vast majority (93%) reported the availability for ecstasy pills, powder and capsules as 'easy to very easy' to obtain. The majority reported last using ecstasy in a nightclub (44%) followed by at a private party (15%).

### MDMA crystal/rock

This is the fourth year in which specific market characteristics were collected for MDMA crystal/rock. Participants reported MDMA crystal/rock to be of a higher purity than the other forms of ecstasy (Table 1). Price nationally is approximately \$200 per gram of MDMA crystal/rock and \$30 per capsule. Price remained stable (64%) over the preceding six month period. Over half (54%) reported purity of MDMA crystal/rock to be 'high' compared to the other forms of ecstasy (25%).

All forms of ecstasy were considered 'easy' to 'very easy' to obtain (Table 1).

**Table 1: Market characteristic comparisons of ecstasy pills, powder and capsules versus MDMA crystal/rock, nationally, 2016**

	Ecstasy (pills, powder, capsules) (N=727)	MDMA crystal/ rock (N=352)
<b>% Availability (n)</b>		
Very easy	55	36
Easy	38	47
Difficult	7	15
Very difficult	<1	1
<b>% Purity (n)</b>		
Low	14	3
Medium	33	29
High	25	54
Fluctuates	29	14

Source: EDRS participant interviews

Note: The response 'don't know' was excluded from analysis

### New psychoactive substances (NPS)

#### Recent use

This class of drug known as new psychoactive substances (NPS) or termed 'analogues and other synthetic drugs' by law enforcement have been present in Australia and on the international market since the mid 2000's. NPS are variants or mimic a parent compound which is usually a prohibited or scheduled drug e.g. cocaine or MDMA. Prevalence of NPS use in the EDRS remains moderate and frequency of use remains low.

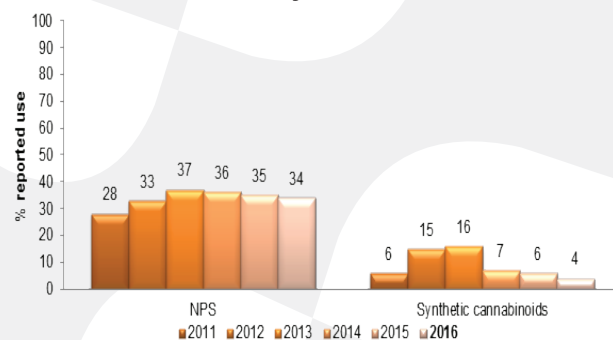
In 2016, the number of EDRS participants that had consumed an NPS in the previous six month period remained steady at 34% (35% in 2015) (Figure 4). Frequency of use for individual NPS remains low at 1-2 days over the last six months (i.e. equating to sporadic use). Sub-groups within this class includes tryptamines (e.g. DMT) and phenethylamines (e.g. the 2C and NBOMe families). The most commonly used NPS in 2016 were DMT and 2C-x.

Cannabimimetics or synthetic cannabinoids are substances which mimic the effects of tetrahydrocannabinoid (THC), the main psychoactive

component of cannabis and are also classed as NPS. The use of synthetic cannabinoids in 2016 remained low at 4% (Figure 3).

About one-fifth (18%) of the national sample reported ever purchasing a drug online (including NPS and traditional illicit drugs), with 14% reporting that they had done so in the past year.

**Figure 3: Recent use of NPS and synthetic cannabinoids, nationally, 2011-2016**



Source: EDRS participant interviews

### Methamphetamine

#### Recent use

The EDRS distinguishes between the three forms of methamphetamine – methamphetamine powder (speed powder); methamphetamine base (base); and crystalline methamphetamine (crystal). The recent use of all forms of methamphetamine (speed powder, base and crystal) remained stable between 2015 and 2016 (Figure 4). Frequency of use was relatively stable across the forms (nationally speed powder: 2 days, base: 2 days, crystal: 8 days; and any form methamphetamine: 4 days). Seven percent of the national sample reported 'weekly or more' use of any methamphetamine (6% crystal, 1% speed powder and <1% base).

**Figure 4: Prevalence of recent use of methamphetamine, nationally, 2003-2016**



Source: EDRS participant interviews

## Market characteristics

In relation to availability, speed powder was reported as 'easy' and crystal as 'very easy' to obtain in the last six months. Small numbers commented on the availability of base with one-third each reporting the availability as either 'very easy', 'easy' or 'difficult'. In 2016, crystal and base were considered to be of 'high' purity (50% and 45% respectively), while speed powder was reported as 'medium' purity (42%) (Table 2). Median price remained stable for all forms of methamphetamine at \$50-\$75 per point and \$200 - \$400 a gram.

**Table 2: Perceptions of availability and purity of methamphetamine, nationally, 2016**

	Speed powder (N=102)	Base (N=19)	Crystal (N=120)
<b>% Availability</b>			
Very easy	18	32	63
Easy	42	32	29
Difficult	28	32	8
Very difficult	12	5	0
<b>% Purity</b>			
Low	19	10	2
Medium	42	25	35
High	34	45	50
Fluctuates	4	20	13

Source: EDRS participant interviews

Note: The response 'don't know' was excluded from analysis

## Cocaine, LSD, Ketamine and GHB

### Recent use

The recent use and frequency of cocaine USE remained stable in 2016. Almost half (47%) reported recent cocaine use but only small numbers reported using cocaine 'weekly or more' (1.5%). The majority (86%) of the national sample reported recent cannabis use, with 21% reporting 'daily' use.

In 2016, there was a significant increase in the recent use of ketamine (26% vs. 15% in 2015), LSD (45% vs. 40% in 2015) and GHB (8% vs. 5% in 2015). Days of use remained low (sporadic), however there was a significant increase in frequency of use for LSD (3 days vs. 2 days in 2015) and GHB (3 days vs. 2 days in 2015).

## Tobacco, alcohol and other drugs

### Recent use

Alcohol was the second most used drug by the national sample over a six month period, with almost all participants (97%) reporting recent use. Median days of use was 48 (approximately twice weekly), with 3% of the sample reporting daily drinking. Seventy-three percent of the national sample obtained a score of eight or more on the AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorders

Identification Test) indicating these are levels at which alcohol intake may be considered hazardous.

In 2016, a significant increase was found for the recent use of benzodiazepines (38% vs. 32% in 2015), nitrous oxide (36% vs. 26% in 2015), amyl nitrate (27% vs. 21% in 2015) and other opiates (21% vs. 14% in 2015). The recent use of e-cigarettes significantly decreased (26% vs. 34% in 2015). All other drugs remained stable.

## Drug related harms

### Injecting risk behaviours

In 2016, 10% of the national sample reported ever injecting a drug and 4% reported injecting in the last month. The median age of first injection was 19 years. There were no significant differences between 2015 and 2016 data.

### Sexual risk behaviours

Thirty-six percent of the national sample reported no casual sexual partners in the last six months, while 23% reported between three and five casual sexual partners in 2016. Over half (55%) of the national sample reported penetrative sex with a casual partner while on drugs and 24% reported that they did not use protection the last time they had sex with a casual partner. Nearly half (46%) reported a sexual health check-up in the past year. There were no significant differences between 2015 and 2016 data.

### Self-reported mental health

In 2016, over one-third (38%) of the national sample self-reported a mental health problem in the last six months, mainly anxiety (25%) and depression (24%). Around one-fifth (22%) reported visiting a health professional for their self-reported mental health problem. No significant differences were found between years.

### Criminal activity

Thirty-six percent of the national sample in 2016 reported 'any' criminal activity in the last month. The most common forms of criminal activity were drug dealing (27%) and property crime (13%). Eight percent reported that they had been a victim of violent crime in the past month. Ten percent of the sample had been arrested in the last 12 months. Small numbers reported a prison history (4%). No significant differences between years were found.

## MORE INFORMATION

For more detailed information on the prevalence of use, price, purity/potency and availability by this group, including key expert and indicator data in each jurisdiction, please refer to the national and jurisdictional EDRS *Drug Trends* annual reports, which will be available through NDARC in early 2017. Past reports are available on the Drug Trends website ([www.drugtrends.org.au](http://www.drugtrends.org.au)).

## Participating researchers and research centres

A/Professor Lucinda Burns, Dr Courtney Breen, Ms Jennifer Stafford, Ms Kerryn Butler, Ms Rachel Sutherland, Ms Antonia Karlsson and Ms Elizabeth Whittaker, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Australia (National, NSW, ACT, SA and the NT);

Mr Arthur Truong and Professor Paul Dietze, Burnet Institute Victoria (VIC);

Ms Bethany Lusk, Dr Allison Matthews and A/Professor Raimondo Bruno, School of Medicine (Psychology), University of Tasmania (TAS);

Ms Marina Nelson and Professor Simon Lenton, National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Western Australia (WA); and

Dr Caroline Salom and Professor Rosa Alati, School of Public Health, University of Queensland (QLD).

## Other acknowledgements

The participants and key experts who took part in the interview.

The agencies that assisted with interviewing and indicator data.

The EDRS is funded by the Australian Government under the Substance Misuse Prevention and Service Improvement Grants Fund.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Stafford J., Sutherland, R., Burns, L. and Breen, C (2016). The 2016 EDRS key findings: a survey of people who regularly use psychostimulant drugs. EDRS Drug Trends Bulletin, October 2016. Sydney: National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Australia.