

**Author: Ms Natasha Sindicich and Dr Lucy Burns; National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre,
University of New South Wales.**

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Key findings

- Ecstasy remains the primary drug of choice (38%), however ecstasy has continued to decline in preference since 2005.
- Average ecstasy use was fortnightly.
- Significantly more participants in 2010 reported access to ecstasy as being 'difficult' to 'very difficult' to obtain and purity as 'low' compared with 2009.
- All forms of methamphetamine remained at similarly low levels of use in terms of prevalence and frequency compared to 2009.
- Recent cocaine use has steadily increased since monitoring began in 2003 and is currently at the highest prevalence reported to date (48%). However, frequency of use remained low at three days across all states except NSW where median days was five (approximately monthly use).
- In 2010, the EDRS actively monitored the prevalence of mephedrone capsules and powder. Nationally, 16% of participants had consumed the drug in the preceding six months prior to interview. The majority of use had occurred in TAS and VIC. Frequency of use was intermittent (median days 3) and the main route of administration was oral and nasal ingestion.

An overview of the 2010 EDRS: the regular ecstasy users survey findings

Introduction

The Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) is the most comprehensive and detailed study of ecstasy and related drug markets in Australia. The EDRS uses a similar methodology to the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS). The EDRS monitors the price, purity and availability of 'ecstasy' (MDMA) and other related drugs such as methamphetamine, cocaine, GHB and ketamine. It also examines trends in the use and harms of these drugs. The data collection includes: a) surveys with regular ecstasy users (REU); b) surveys with key experts who have contact with regular ecstasy users 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 REU survey component of the 2010 national EDRS, in which 693 participants were recruited (73 from the ACT, 92 from SA, 100 each from NSW, VIC, TAS and WA, 101 from QLD and 27 from the NT). This represents the eighth year in which the study was conducted nationally.

Regular ecstasy users were recruited as they are considered a sentinel group able to provide information on trends in ecstasy and related drug use and related harms. The information from the REU survey is therefore not representative of illicit drug use in the general population, and is not representative of other illicit drug users (e.g. in other geographical areas, occasional users, etc), but it is indicative of emerging trends that may warrant further monitoring and/or investigation.

Drug trends in this publication are cited by state/territory, although they represent trends in the capital city of each jurisdiction. 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 April 2011. Previous years' findings are available in national and jurisdictional reports on the NDARC website,

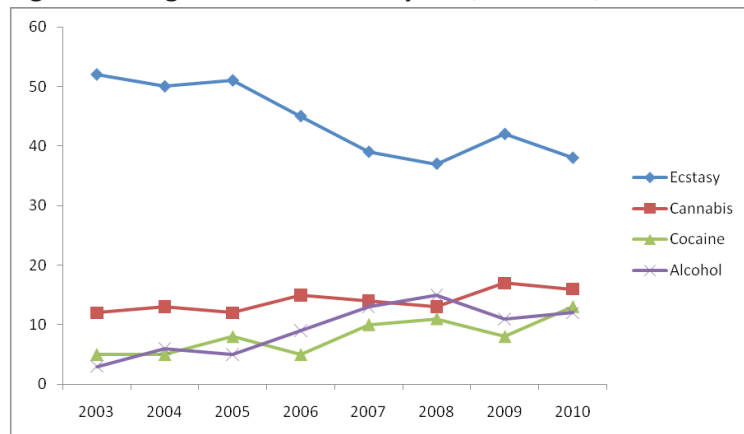
www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au (click on 'Drug Trends').

Notes on interpretation: 'Prevalence' data in this bulletin refer to the proportion of REU participants who had used the drug on at least one occasion in the last six months. 'Frequency' data refer to the number of days on which those participants had recently used the drug over the last six months i.e 180 days = daily use, 24 days = weekly, 6 days = monthly use. 'Lifetime' refers to ever having used a drug. 'Recent' refers to the six months preceding interview. Due to the criteria used for participant inclusion in the study, all participants report lifetime and monthly use of ecstasy.

National Overview

Ecstasy was the drug most frequently cited as participants' drug of choice (i.e. preferred drug), nominated by approximately two-fifths (38%) of the national sample. This figure has decreased over time (from 52% in 2003; see figure 1). In 2010, the second most frequently nominated drug of choice was cannabis (16%), followed by cocaine (13%) and alcohol (12%). Most notably, cocaine has increased in preference nationally, now ranked third. Alcohol preference has continued to steadily increase over time (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Drug of choice trends by REU, Australia, 2003-2010



Source: EDRS REU interviews

Ecstasy

Consumption patterns

Nationally, ecstasy (includes all forms of pills, powder and capsules) was used on a median of 12 days in the six months prior to interview (approximately once per fortnight; range 1-96 days). A fifth (23%) reported using ecstasy once per week or more often. There were no reports of daily ecstasy use. Participants reported using a median of two ecstasy tablets in a typical session of use. A third (38%) reported use of more than two tablets in a typical session.

Poly drug use is a common practice in this sample with the majority of participants having reported using other drugs (including alcohol and tobacco) with ecstasy, and following the use of ecstasy (i.e. during the 'come down'). Around one-third (34%) of the 2010 sample reported that they had binged on ecstasy and related drugs in the six months prior to interview (bingeing being defined as using the drug on a continuous basis for more than 48 hours without sleep). As can be seen in Table 1, patterns of ecstasy use have remained largely stable across the eight years the EDRS has been conducted in all states and territories.

Table 1: Patterns of ecstasy use in Australia, 2003-2010

	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Median days#	12	15	15	12	12	12	12	12
Median tablets used in 'average' use session	1.5	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Recently binged on stimulant drugs* (%)	51	43	49	49	44	32	36	34
Use other drugs^ with ecstasy (%)	91	93	93	93	94	94	82**	92
Use ecstasy weekly or more # (%)	33	37	34	31	27	26	30	19

Source: EDRS REU interviews

*bingeing defined as using the drug on a continuous basis for more than 48hrs without sleep

^ also includes alcohol and tobacco

refers to ecstasy pills only

**n=553

Market characteristics

The price of ecstasy pills in 2010 varied across jurisdictions (\$23-35; see table 2). Fluctuation in price may be linked to national and global market indicators that would suggest MDMA is decreasing in availability and purity. Nationally, Australian border detections of MDMA are at the lowest number and weight reported in the last decade (Australian Crime Commission, 2010). This reduction in MDMA has been hypothesized to be linked to an increase in seizure MDMA precursors and destruction of large stockpiles in South East Asia (Australian Crime Commission, 2010).

REU data supported the suggestion of a decrease in ecstasy (MDMA) availability and purity with significantly more participants having reported ecstasy to be difficult to very difficult (26% in 2010 vs. 12% in 2009; $p < 0.05$). In relation to purity, significantly more participants have reported ecstasy to

be of low purity (24% in 2009 vs. 56% in 2010; $p < 0.05$ see table 3). When REU were asked to comment about changes they had noticed in the drug using market, a common theme across all jurisdictions was the noticed decrease in quality (purity) of ecstasy pills (see forthcoming national and jurisdictional reports for further discussion).

Table 2: Median price of ecstasy per tablet, 2008-2010

	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
2008	30	30	27.5	35	25	40	50	25
2009	20	25	25	35	20	35	50	20
2010	25	25	25	35	23	35	35	25

Source: EDRS REU interviews

Table 3: Perceptions of current availability and purity of ecstasy, by REU who commented nationally, 2010

	2010	2009
Current availability (%)	N=686	N=746
Very easy	29	43
Easy	45	45
Difficult	22	11
Very difficult	4	1
Current purity (%)	N=683	N=739
Low	56	24
Medium	18	36
High	6	13
Fluctuates	21	28

Source: EDRS REU interviews

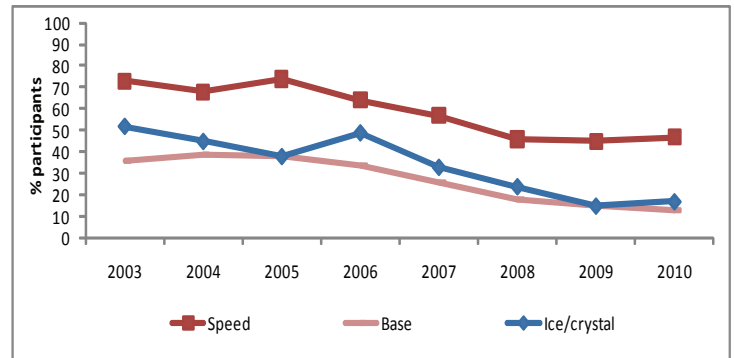
Methamphetamine

Consumption patterns

The EDRS distinguishes between the three forms of methamphetamine, methamphetamine powder ('speed'); methamphetamine base ('base'); and crystalline methamphetamine, ('crystal' or 'ice'). Nationally, the proportion of participants reporting use of any form of methamphetamine has decreased (84% in 2003 to 56% in 2010). In 2010, there was relative stability in reported recent use of all forms of methamphetamine relative to 2009 (Figure 2).

Frequency of use remained low across all forms, (speed a median of 3; base median of 2 and ice/crystal a median of 4 days respectively, i.e. approximately once a month or less. Similar to 2009 findings, daily use of speed was reported by $n < 5$ of the national sample.

Figure 2: Prevalence of use of methamphetamine and cocaine, by REU in the six months preceding interview, Australia, 2003-2010



Source: EDRS REU interviews

Market characteristics

The price of a gram of speed varied, with the median price ranging from \$55 in NSW to \$350 in NT. The median price for a point of ice/crystal varied this year from \$50 in NSW and WA to \$100 in the NT.

All three forms of methamphetamine were considered by the majority of reports to be 'easy' to 'very easy' to obtain. Reports of purity varied by jurisdiction, nationally the majority of the sample reported speed was of 'medium' purity and base and ice/crystal were of 'high' purity.

Table 4: Perceptions of current availability and purity/potency of methamphetamine by participants who commented, nationally 2010

	Methamphetamine (%)		
	Speed powder	Base	Ice/crystal
Availability	n=187	n=58	n=66
Very easy	28	29	42
Easy	52	53	36
Difficult	18	17	21
Very difficult	2	0	0
Purity	n=177	n=56	n=66
Low	12	14	15
Medium	48	30	23
High	23	46	50
Fluctuates	16	9	13

Source: EDRS REU interviews

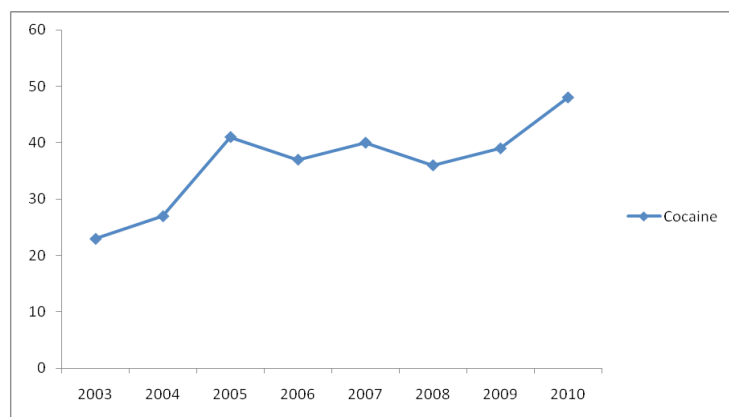
Cocaine

Consumption patterns

Recent use of cocaine has gradually increased since monitoring began in 2003 and currently at the highest level of use yet

reported (23% in 2003 vs 48% in 2010). While use continued to vary across jurisdictions, contrary to most years where recent use levels were low (20-30%), recent use levels in all but WA, was between 40-60% of the sample (Figure 3). National indicators of large border seizures and arrest/possession rates (especially in NSW) have also increased (Australian Crime Commission, 2010; Bureau of Crime Statistics, 2010). Frequency of use however remained low at 2-3 days (sporadic use) with the exception of NSW where use is just below monthly at 5 days.

Figure 3: Prevalence of recent use cocaine by REU, Australia, 2003-2010



Source: EDRS REU interviews

Market characteristics

The price per gram of cocaine ranged from \$300 in NSW, VIC, QLD and the ACT to \$400 in the NT. As with methamphetamine, reports of availability and purity varied within and across jurisdictions. Nationally cocaine was reported by the majority of participants as 'very easy to easy' (60%) to obtain. In relation to purity, significantly more participants in 2010 reported that cocaine was of 'medium' purity (42% in 2010 vs. 28% in 2009; $p < 0.05$).

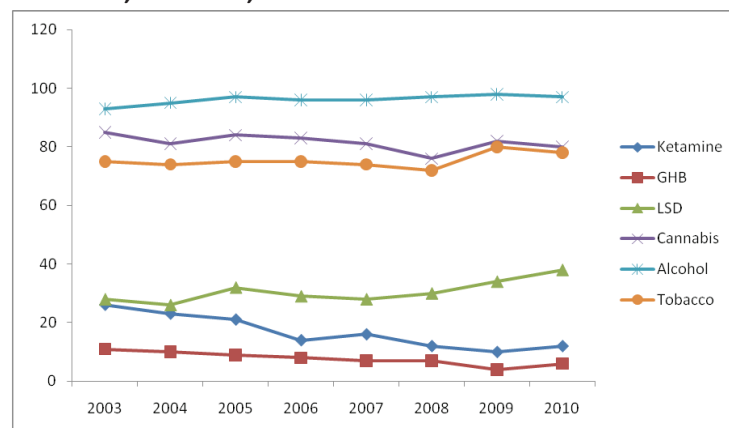
Ketamine, GHB and LSD

Consumption patterns

The prevalence of recent ketamine and GHB¹ use has remained low and stable, with 12% of the national sample reporting recent ketamine use (see figure 4). A decline in recent ketamine use was observed from 2003 (26%). Recent use of GHB has remained low over time and use appears to be localized to NSW, VIC and SA. National use of LSD has increased, from 28% in 2003 to 38% in 2010 (see figure 4). Frequency of use of these three classes of drugs remained intermittent at two days for ketamine and GHB and three days for LSD.

¹ GHB occurs naturally in the body, but has been synthetically developed as an anesthetic.

Figure 4: Prevalence of use of Ketamine, GHB, LSD, Cannabis, alcohol and tobacco by REU in the six months preceding interview, Australia, 2003-2010



Source: EDRS REU interviews

Tobacco, cannabis and alcohol

Consumption patterns

Recent use of cannabis, alcohol and tobacco was reported by 80%, 97% and 78% respectively (see figure 4). Fourteen percent of the national sample reported daily cannabis use, 9% daily alcohol use and 38% reported daily tobacco use (among those who reported using these drugs in the last 6 months). Alcohol remained the drug most used by this group. Alcohol is the drug nominated as most typically used with ecstasy (by 91% of those that commented, $n=639$), followed by tobacco (56%) and cannabis (42%). Alcohol is also the drug most reported (by 78% of the national sample) after ecstasy (84%) to be used in a binge² session. The practice of mixing alcohol and energy drinks was reported by 70% of the national sample.

Research chemical drugs

Mephedrone

In 2010 the EDRS investigated the prevalence of research chemical synthetics that had been reported to be entering the international and local illicit drug market. Of specific interest was the novel synthetic stimulant drug Mephedrone (4-methylmethcathinone). The national prevalence in this REU sample was 16% with most use reported in TAS and VIC (see table 5). In the REU 2010 sample, main route of administration of mephedrone was reported to be by oral or nasal ingestion and it was consumed on a median of three days (sporadic use) in the last six months. In relation to effects, a common theme

² bingeing is defined as using the drug on a continuous basis for more than 48 hours without sleep.

reported by participants was that the effects were similar to a mix between MDMA and cocaine stimulant effects. Reports remained varied in relation to whether the 'come down' was easier or more difficult than MDMA. Price per gram appears to vary according to form (powder or capsules) and jurisdiction (see table 5) though a fifth (23%) of recent users reported that they received the substance as a 'free' gift. In terms of accessibility of the drug, reports also remained mixed between being 'easy' and 'very difficult'. The main routes of attainment of the drug were on the internet, through a dealer or from friends. For more information please see forthcoming *EDRS Drug Trends Bulletin in December 2010*.

Table 5: Recent use of mephedrone and median price per quantity by jurisdiction, 2010

	National	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
Recent use (%)	16	4	1	28	42	9	16	4	13
Median Price									
Per gram	-	\$60 [^]	\$30 [^]	\$175 [^]	\$78 [^]	\$200 [^]	\$45 [^]	-	\$260
Per capsule	-	\$30 [^]	-	\$30 [^]	\$30	\$25 [^]	\$20 [^]	\$40 [^]	\$15 [^]

Source: EDRS REU interviews

[^] Small numbers n<10; interpret with caution

Participating researchers and research centres

Dr Lucy Burns, Natasha Sindicich, Jennifer Stafford, Joanne Cassar, Bridget Spicer, Laura Scott and Benjamin Phillips, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (National, NSW, ACT & NT)

Anita Feigin and A/Prof Paul Dietze, Burnet Institute (VIC)

Dr Allison Matthews and Dr Raimondo Bruno, University of Tasmania (TAS)

Candice Rainsford and Prof Simon Lenton, National Drug Research Institute (WA)

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New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (2010). New South Wales recorded crime statistics, Quarterly update March 2010. *Statistical Report Series*. New South Wales, Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

For further information:

For further jurisdictional information on any information reported above visit www.ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au, click on 'Drug Trends', and see: 2010 Drug Trends Conference: 'Key Findings of the 2010 IDRS and EDRS (15th October 2010).