

Factsheet: MDMA/ecstasy - the Irish situation

April 2025

Table of Contents

Glossary of terms.....	1
What is ecstasy?	2
What does ecstasy do?.....	2
How do we know how many people use ecstasy in Ireland?.....	2
How many people use ecstasy in Ireland?	2
How many people receive treatment for ecstasy use?.....	3
How many people die from using MDMA/ecstasy?.....	4
What does the law say about MDMA/ecstasy?	4
Seizures of MDMA/ecstasy	4
References.....	5

Glossary of terms

Drug prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that has used a named drug during a particular time period. That is, how many people in specific group have used a drug during a specified timeframe.

Last month prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that reported using a named drug in the 30-day period prior to the survey. Last month prevalence is often referred to as current use. Some of those reporting current use may be occasional or first-time users who happen to have used in the period leading up to the survey, so current use is not the same as regular use.

Last year prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that reported using a named drug in the 12 months prior to the survey. Last year prevalence is often referred to as recent use.

Lifetime prevalence – refers to the proportion of a population that reported ever having used a named drug before the time they were surveyed. A person who records lifetime prevalence may or may not be currently using the drug. Lifetime prevalence should not be interpreted as meaning that people have used a drug over a long period of time or that they will use the drug again in future.

Mean (average) versus Median – One of the most used statistical measures is the mean (more often simply termed the 'average'). The mean/average is the sum of the characteristics of the group (e.g. ages, wages or prices) divided by the number in the group. To represent the central tendency of a group, median is the appropriate statistical measure. The median is found by ordering the group characteristics in ascending value and selecting the middle one. The median is a better measure of the central tendency of the group as it is not skewed by exceptionally high or low characteristic values.

What is ecstasy?

MDMA (Methylenedioxymethamphetamine) is a synthetic substance commonly known as ecstasy. Illicit MDMA is normally seen as tablets, many of which are manufactured in Europe. It acts as a central nervous system (CNS) stimulant and has a weak hallucinogenic property more accurately described as increased sensory awareness. MDMA in tablet form is almost always used orally (ingested), but the powdered form could also be snorted, inhaled or injected. MDMA is under international control.¹

Ecstasy was originally used to describe MDMA, but now generally describes a wide range of phenethylamines and certain unrelated substances. In this factsheet we use the term reported in each study.

What does ecstasy do?

People who take ecstasy often experience a rush of energy that makes them feel alert, excited and happy. Sound, particularly music, and colours seem more intense and many people feel an increased sense of affection for people around them. The ecstasy high usually lasts three to six hours, after which it is replaced by a comedown similar to that experienced after taking cocaine or amphetamines.²

How do we know how many people use ecstasy in Ireland?

Every four years a survey of the general population takes place to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use alcohol and other drugs.³ Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+ normally resident in households in Ireland. This type of survey is not designed to include people who do not normally live in private households, such as prisoners or hostel dwellers.³

Drug prevalence surveys were undertaken in 2002–03, 2006–07, 2010–11, and 2014–15. These surveys were commissioned on an all-island basis by the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol in the Republic of Ireland, and the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety in Northern Ireland. The most recent survey 2019–20 National Drug and Alcohol Survey (NDAS), which took place in the Republic of Ireland, was managed by the Health Research Board.

How many people use ecstasy in Ireland?

The 2019–20 NDAS survey involved 5,762 people in Ireland:³ The results showed:

- 8.5% of respondents had ever used ecstasy in their lifetime, corresponding to 333,000 of the general population in Ireland aged 15 years and older.
- 2.2% of respondents (87,000 of the general population) and 1.0% of respondents (41,000 of the general population) had used ecstasy in the last year and the last month, respectively.
- The average age of first ecstasy use was 19.9 years (median: 20 years).
- The average age of participants who reported recent ecstasy use was 25.8 years (median: 24 years).
- The average age of first regular ecstasy use was 20.1 years (median: 20 years).

- The proportion of respondents who personally knew somebody who used ecstasy was 20.8%.

Ecstasy was the second most commonly used illegal drug in the year prior to the survey. Males were more likely than females to report recent use of ecstasy (3.2% versus 1.3%). Those aged 15–24 years were most likely to report recent ecstasy use (7.2%). There were significant sex differences in the prevalence of recent ecstasy use among those aged 25–34 years, with 9.7% of males reporting recent use compared with 1.9% of females in the same age group.

Recent (last year) ecstasy use increased from 1.1% in 2002–03 to 2.7% in 2019–20 (Table 1). With the exception of the 2010–11 survey, recent ecstasy use increased at each survey. There was a significant decrease in 2010–11 (to 0.5%), but recent use increased to 2.1% in 2014–15. In the 2010–11 survey, new psychoactive substances (NPS) were the second most commonly used illegal substance, with 3.5% of 15–64-year-olds reporting recent use. It is possible that ecstasy was replaced by stimulant like NPS in the year prior to that survey. Following the introduction of the Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substances) Act 2010, recent use of NPS was found to have decreased in the 2014–15 survey to 0.8%, while recent use of ecstasy increased.

Table 1: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of ecstasy use among 15–64-year-olds (%)

	2002–03	2006–07	2010–11	2014–15	2019–20
Lifetime	3.7	5.5*	6.9	9.2*	10.3
Last year	1.1	1.2	0.5*	2.1*	2.7
Last month	0.3	0.3	0.1*	1.0*	1.3

* Significant change ($p < 0.05$) in prevalence of ecstasy when compared with prevalence reported in the previous survey.

For further information on ecstasy use (prevalence and treatment) see our [Regional data factsheets](#).

In the [Growing Up in Ireland: Cohort '98 at age 25](#) survey, respondents were specifically asked about cannabis usage, followed by a separate question concerning other non-prescription drug use, 10.7% said they had used ecstasy at least once in the last year.⁴

Surveys conducted by 26 EU countries between 2015 and 2023 suggest that 2.2 million young adults (15 to 34) used MDMA in the last year (2.2 % of this age group), with 2.3 % (1.1 million) of those aged 15 to 24 years estimated to have used MDMA in the last year.⁵

How many people receive treatment for ecstasy use?

The HRB's [National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#) (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland.^a

In 2023, MDMA continued to account for a small proportion of all treated cases.⁶ 11 cases in treatment reported MDMA as their main problem drug.

^a The NDTRS contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include the number in continuous care. Note: Cases are episodes of treatment not individuals, which means there is a possibility that individuals appear more than once in the data; for example, where a person receives treatment at more than one centre, or at the same centre more than once in a calendar year.

Table 2: Main problem drug (excluding alcohol) reported in 30 days prior to treatment, NDTRS 2017 to 2023

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N(%)
All cases	8,922	10,274	10,664	9,702	10,769	12,009	13,104
MDMA (ecstasy)	44 (0.5)	34 (0.3)	47 (0.4)	31 (0.3)	12 (0.1)	17 (0.1)	11 (0.1)
New cases	3,257	3,962	3,979	3,796	4,206	4,456	4,792
MDMA (ecstasy)	29 (0.9)	18 (0.5)	38 (1.0)	21 (0.6)	8 (0.2)	12 (0.3)	8 (0.2)
Previously treated cases	5,242	5,872	5,927	5,441	6,090	6,860	7,588
MDMA (ecstasy)	15 (0.3)	14 (0.2)	9 (0.2)	8 (0.1)	~	~	~

Note: N is the number of cases. The percentage is in brackets

See the NDTRS report⁶ for more information on polydrug use - additional problem drugs for all cases and new cases.

For more detailed treatment data (eg.age, gender, employment status) up to 2023 see library [interactive tables](#).

How many people die from using MDMA/ecstasy?

The HRB's [National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#) (NDRDI) is a database which records cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, and deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent.

In total 354 people died from poisoning in 2021. MDMA was implicated in 12 poisoning deaths.⁷

Table 3 MDMA implicated in poisoning deaths, NDRDI 2012 to 2021

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
All poisoning deaths	273	324	311	310	307	325	361	375	439	354
MDMA	12	14	15	8	9	16	16	15	11	12

What does the law say about MDMA/ecstasy?

MDMA and related compounds were included in Schedule 1 of the Misuse of Drugs Acts in 1987. Under the legislation a person who has this controlled drug in their possession is guilty of an offence. They have no medicinal use and cannot be prescribed by doctors, sold or distributed and it is also illegal to possess them. The chemicals used to produce the drug (precursors) are strictly controlled and monitored under both EU and National Regulations.⁸ You can find more information about Irish drug laws, offences and penalties on the [Citizens Information Board website](#).

Seizures of MDMA/ecstasy

Following a peak in 2013 (n=434), the number of MDMA seizures decreased until 2015 (n=202). Between 2015 and 2016, an increase of 71% was shown. Although the change between 2016 and 2017 was negligible, between 2017 and 2018, the analyses of MDMA seizures decreased by 12%.

Data received from FSI have shown that the number of MDMA analyses in 2019 (n=974) was more than three times higher than in 2018 (n=304). Since 2020, a decreasing trajectory has been shown, between 2019 and 2020 (35%), between 2020 and 2021 (39%), between 2021 and 2022 (3%) and between 2022 and 2023 (39%).⁹

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Further reading:

European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, Europol (2022) [EU drug market: methamphetamine — in-depth analysis](#).

For regional Irish data, please see our [regional factsheets webpage](#).

How to cite this factsheet:

HRB National Drugs Library (2025) MDMA/ecstasy - the Irish situation. HRB National Drugs Library, Dublin <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/30984/>

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