Factsheet: MDMA/ecstasy - the Irish situation 2026

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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.

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?

MDMA can cause:

- increased blood pressure and heart rate
- nausea (feeling sick)
- loss of appetite - this can affect your health and energy levels over time
- increased sweating and body temperature
- dehydration
- dry mouth and throat
- teeth grinding or jaw clenching
- dilated pupils
- problems peeing
- lower levels of sodium (hyponatremia)
- hallucinations - you may see, hear or feel things that are not there
- lower inhibitions - you may do things you would not usually do
- tremor
- seizures (fits)
- problems sleeping
- liver, kidney or heart problems - if you use it often.[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 27 EU countries between 2015 and 2024 suggest that 2.6 million young adults (15 to 34) used MDMA in the last year (2.4 % of this age group).[5]

The European Union Drugs Agency (EUDA) has developed the **European Web Survey on Drugs** (EWSD)[6] in order to collect data from a wide range of people who use drugs. In 2024, Ireland participated in the EWSD for the second time. The 2024 Irish EWSD was an online, convenience, non-probability survey. The study population included people aged 18 years and over who lived in Ireland and who had used drugs in the previous 12 months. The final sample for analysis was 2,406, of whom 63.1% were male and 35.7% were female.

Table 2: Last year prevalence of MDMA use by gender (%)

All	Male	Female
N = 2,406	n = 1,518	n = 858
85.4	86.6	83.2

Table 3: Last month prevalence of MDMA use by gender (%)

All	Male	Female
N = 2,406	n = 1,518	n = 858
65.2	69.4	57.1

Source: European web survey on drugs 2024: Irish results

How many people receive treatment for ecstasy use?

The HRB's National Drug Treatment Reporting System (NDTRS) is the national database that records and reports on treated problem alcohol and drug use in Ireland. Treatment for problem alcohol and drug use in Ireland is provided by statutory and non-statutory services, including residential centres, community-based addiction services, general practices, and prison services. The dataset contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include service users in continuous care. As there is currently no national system-wide unique identifier in the Irish health system, the NDTRS records cases of treatment. In any given year, individuals may appear more than once if treated in different centres or if they return to treatment in the same centre.

In 2025, MDMA continued to account for a small proportion of all treated cases.[7] 11 cases entering treatment reported MDMA as their main problem drug.

Table 4: Main problem drug (excluding alcohol) reported in 30 days prior to treatment, NDTRS 2017 to 2025

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
All cases	8,922	10,274	10,664	9,702	10,769	12,009	13,104	13,293	15,422
MDMA (ecstasy)	44 (0.5)	34 (0.3)	47 (0.4)	31 (0.3)	12 (0.1)	17 (0.1)	11 (0.1)	12 (0.1)	11 (0.1)
New cases	3,257	3,962	3,979	3,796	4,206	4,456	4,792	4,771	5,134
MDMA (ecstasy)	29 (0.9)	18 (0.5)	38 (1.0)	21 (0.6)	8 (0.2)	12 (0.3)	8 (0.2)	8 (0.2)	7 (0.1)

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Previously treated cases	5,242	5,872	5,927	5,441	6,090	6,860	7,588	7,717	9,333
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
~ Less than 5 cases

See the NDTRS report[7] 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 2025 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 343 people died from poisoning in 2022. MDMA was implicated in five deaths or fewer. [8]

Table 5 MDMA implicated in poisoning deaths, NDRDI 2013 to 2022

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
All poisoning deaths	324	311	309	309	326	363	379	446	373	343
MDMA	14	16	8	10	16	17	17	17	~	~

~ five deaths or fewer
Unpublished data

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.[9] 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). Between 2020 and 2023, 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 (18%). Between 2023 and 2024, the number of MDMA analysis increased by 75%).[10]

References

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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.

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