

Media Tip Sheet: MDMA / Molly / Ecstasy

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What is the difference between MDMA, ecstasy, and molly?

MDMA, short for 3,4-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine, is a psychoactive drug derived from safrole oil. It acts as a central nervous system stimulant and has effects that resemble both stimulants and psychedelics. People who use MDMA report feeling open, accepted, unafraid and connected to people around them.¹ “Ecstasy” and “molly” are both colloquial terms used by sellers and consumers to refer to MDMA. Although people taking ecstasy or molly usually want MDMA,

because of the unregulated nature of drug distribution under prohibition, no one is 100% sure what is actually being sold and consumed.²

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“A young woman was hospitalized after taking a substance sold as molly, a drug commonly associated with MDMA. In actuality “molly” can contain any number of different substances.”

Can MDMA be used as medicine or therapy?

Before MDMA became popular at festivals, clubs and concerts, it was utilized for therapeutic purposes by mental health professionals. Currently, organizations like MAPS (the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies) are funding research that demonstrates how MDMA is effective in treating people with PTSD, autism, end-of-life anxiety, and other difficult-to-treat conditions. Promising

results have emerged, and MAPS is aiming for MDMA to be FDA-approved and legally available for medical uses within the next decade.³

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“Experts point out that a growing body of research is demonstrating MDMA’s efficacy in helping treat PTSD, various forms of autism, and the terminally ill.”

Why is using the word “overdose” in association with MDMA usually inaccurate?

“Overdose” refers to taking a higher than appropriate dose of a medicine or drug. MDMA overdose can occur, but it’s extremely rare. It is much more likely that a problem would occur as a result of MDMA use with contraindicated medications (such as MAOI anti-depressants), preexisting health conditions, overexertion, or dehydration. Hyperthermia – a dangerously high increase in body temperature, or heatstroke – is the most common health problem related to MDMA.⁴ Given the highly-adulterated molly market, it’s also more likely to see an unidentified substance cause problems, rather than MDMA itself – such as what transpired in 2015 at Wesleyan University.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“A recent festival saw several hospitalizations as a result of attendees who had taken “molly”. Given the highly adulterated market, where several substances including cathinones (“bath salts”) may be sold as MDMA, toxicologists are currently working to determine what drug the attendees actually ingested, and if overdose played a role in these medical emergencies.”

What risks are associated with taking MDMA?

As with all alcohol and other drug use, MDMA carries risks, albeit comparatively lower than most. For example, a 2010 study published in the prestigious Lancet journal was conducted to gauge the relative potential harms of drugs to both

consumers and to society, and MDMA was found to be among the least risky.⁵ Still, for a small number of people, even at the typical recreational dosage taking MDMA can result in hospitalization or death. MDMA can make someone more susceptible to heatstroke, especially if dancing in close quarters in a hot room, or outside on a hot day. It also increases water retention, meaning that excessive water intake can be harmful. Mixing MDMA with other drugs, especially alcohol or other stimulants, also poses great risk.⁶ Many of these harms could be prevented by educating the concert and festival-going population about MDMA's

effect, since this group is the most likely to use the drug under these circumstances. The impact of these potential harms can often be reversed when detected and addressed early on.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“A local student was sent to the hospital after overheating while under the influence of MDMA. Once the patient received fluids and spent time cooling down, she was sent home with no further cause for concern.”

What can be done to prevent these risks?

There are three key prevention tactics:

1. Create safe settings

MDMA is commonly used by people attending festivals, concerts and clubs. As such, prioritizing safe settings with access to free water and areas to cool off greatly diminishes the risks of MDMA use.

2. Provide drug education and other services on-site

Organizations like DanceSafe promote harm reduction services at festivals so that people can make informed decisions,

such as unbiased information about drug effects and risks, safe sex tools, and ear plugs. Other organizations like The Zendo Project provide nonjudgmental peer and trained professional assistance for when conditions – whether drug-related or not – become unmanageable for an event attendee.

3. Promote drug checking

Promoting the fact that molly does not necessarily equate to pure MDMA is a key step to safer usage.⁷ Drug checking, a process that tests substances to determine what chemicals are present, can allow people to get a better idea of what's actually in their molly.⁸ Substances called cathinones (amphetamine-like stimulants also known as “bath salts”) are often found in molly, for example, and have different dose levels and effects than MDMA.⁹ Drug checking kits are available, and can help individuals

better understand what they are taking. Due to the way drug paraphernalia laws are written, drug checking kits may be considered illegal in many states, despite their educational and potentially life-saving value.

EXAMPLE PHRASING

“To better protect young people from the risks associated with MDMA, drug education experts recommend providing free water and areas to cool off to avoid overheating at events, and encouraging the use of drug checking kits to test drugs sold as molly for potentially harmful adulterants.”

For more information, please see:

www.drugpolicy.org/drug-facts
www.drugpolicy.org/news
or email:
Tony Newman,
Media Relations Director
newman@drugpolicy.org

Endnotes

1. <http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/drug-profiles/mdma>
2. http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/23/fashion/molly-pure-but-not-so-simple.html?_r=0
3. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0014966/>
4. <http://www.maps.org/research/mdma>
5. <http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2810%2961462-6/fulltext>
6. <https://dancesafe.org/mdma-related-deaths-stop-calling-them-overdoses/>
7. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6350a3.htm>
8. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3123557/>
9. <http://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/synthetic-cathinones-bath-salts>