

High-dose MDMA alerts at 150mg: exploring the utility and appropriateness of alert thresholds

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Introduction: In 2024, there were 16 drug alerts regarding high-dose MDMA published in Australia, raising concerns associated with potential 'alert fatigue'. In Australia, some agencies issue alerts for samples containing at least 150mg MDMA freebase, however concerns have been raised about whether this reporting threshold aligns with community expectations. This study aimed to develop a further understanding of approaches to and considerations surrounding the issuance of high-dose MDMA alerts with a focus on the appropriateness and utility of a 150mg reporting threshold.

Methods: 15 key informants representing drug checking services, drug user organisations and government health departments participated in a survey, of these, seven also participated in a 60-minute focus group. Both the survey and the focus group invited reflections on protocols associated with issuing drug alerts, with attention on reporting thresholds for high-dose MDMA. Data were analysed in accordance with a qualitative description methodology.

Key Findings: Overall participants felt that the 150mg freebase threshold was appropriate for issuing a high-dose MDMA alert. Thresholds were reportedly helpful in expediting decisions regarding the issuance of alerts. Despite these benefits, participants identified several limitations associated with thresholds. Notably, thresholds were described as binary, inflexible and unable to accommodate the contextual nuances of individual cases or adapt to changing market trends and consumption practices. A national repository documenting all detected and tested drugs in Australia was discussed as a potentially valuable source of information to guide future alert-related decisions.

Discussions and Conclusions: Despite drawbacks associated with thresholds for MDMA alerts, participants did not recommend that they be discarded. There was wide support for increased MDMA harm reduction education to accompany alerts. Our findings indicate that further monitoring of market norms, consumer practices and a repository of real-time data on substances that have been tested or detected in Australia may improve drug risk communication.

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