

Features of therapeutic ketamine use from a survey of non-medical ketamine consumers in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Introduction: Interest in therapeutic ketamine use has increased internationally in recent decades. Illicit ketamine and related analogues are used therapeutically globally, but little is known about this use in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Methods: The Aotearoa Ketamine Survey was conducted online between May 2025 and February 2026, capturing various ketamine-related variables (e.g. motivations, consumption patterns) from adults that used ketamine non-medically in the past five years. This descriptive analysis focussed on variables related to nonmedical use motivated by therapeutic benefit.

Results: The total sample included 408 participants aged 18-76 (median = 29, IQR = 25-36). Approximately two-thirds of the total sample reported having searched for information about therapeutic ketamine use. Among participants who had not decided to cease ketamine use (i.e., those for whom motivation remained relevant; n = 348), 18.4% reported therapeutic or medical motivations for use. Specific reasons for use included treatment of anxiety, depression, and pain. Among those endorsing therapeutic motivations, 68.8% reported using ketamine differently when use was intended to be therapeutic, in comparison to other motivation contexts. Participants reported both reductions and increases in dose and frequency of therapeutic use over time, and approximately half reported developing tolerance to perceived therapeutic effects. Therapeutic or medical motivations among those with intentional “k-hole” experience were endorsed by 16.6%. Motivations for seeking a “k-hole” also included psychological self-exploration (58.0%), spiritual experience (54.7%), and insight and understanding/personal growth (47.5%), which may also reflect perceived therapeutic benefit.

Discussion and Conclusions: These findings suggest that therapeutic motivations are relatively common among people using ketamine non-medically in Aotearoa, and that many engage in purposeful information-seeking and distinct patterns of use for this context. The overlap between therapeutic, spiritual, and psychological self-exploration motivations highlights the need for nuanced research and harm reduction approaches that acknowledge therapeutically motivated use while addressing potential risks.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: JW conducted this research during tenure of a Health Sciences Career Development Award at the University of Otago | Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka.