

Awareness of, and behavioural responses to, drug alerts in Australia: Findings from the Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System and the Illicit Drug Reporting System

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Introduction and Aims: 'Drug alerts' are notices sharing urgent health information about specific drugs carrying high risk of harm. The aims of this study were to assess awareness of, and behavioural responses to, drug alerts among Australians who use illegal drugs.

Design and Methods: Between April-August 2021, 774 people who use ecstasy and/or other illegal stimulants and 888 people who inject drugs recruited from capital cities completed a face-to-face interview (including questions on drug alerts) for the Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) and Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS), respectively.

Results: Two-fifths (41%) and one-third (32%) of the EDRS and IDRS samples were aware of a drug alert from the past 12 months, respectively. 'Ecstasy/MDMA containing other drugs' was the most commonly endorsed alert in the total EDRS sample (20%), and 'heroin containing other drugs' in the IDRS sample (18%). In both samples, greatest awareness of alerts was recorded among New South Wales participants. Social media was the most common means of receiving alerts among EDRS participants, and in person among IDRS participants. Less than one-in-ten of those who had seen an alert in both samples tried to obtain the drug referenced in the alert, approximately one-quarter adopted additional harm reduction behaviours, and approximately one-fifth shared the alert with peers.

Discussions and Conclusions: A significant minority of people who use illegal drugs in Australia are aware of drug alerts, notable given that alerts are only released by several jurisdictional/local health agencies. Increased harm reduction behaviour and information sharing with peers are outcomes of such communication.

Implications for Practice or Policy: These findings support the continuation and expansion of risk communication via drug alerts in Australia. The results reinforce the importance of reviewing and finessing communication of drug alerts to ensure intended outcomes are being achieved, and that the needs of people who use illegal drugs are being met.

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