

Non-prescribed ketamine use intended to improve mental health: preliminary results from an Australian survey

Authors:

Stassi Kypri^{1,2}, Jai Whelan³, Krista J Siefried^{1,2,4,5}, Nadine Ezard^{1,2,4,5}, Mitch Lamb⁶, Nick Kent⁷, Jess Doumany⁸, Jack Freestone^{1,2}

¹National Centre for Clinical Research on Emerging Drugs (NCCRED), University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; ²National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC), University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; ³Department of Public Health, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka/University of Otago, Ōtautahi/Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand;

⁴Alcohol and Drug Service, St Vincent's Hospital Sydney, Australia; ⁵New South Wales Drug and Alcohol Clinical Research and Improvement Network (DACRIN), c/o the New South Wales Ministry of Health, St Leonard's, NSW, Australia; ⁶Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA), Canberra, Australia; ⁷Harm Reduction Victoria, Melbourne, Victoria; ⁸Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League, Sydney, Australia.

Contact email: s.kypri@unsw.edu.au

Introduction: Ketamine has emerged as a treatment option for treatment-resistant depression and has shown promise in the treatment of other mental health conditions. Internationally there exists evidence that illicitly sourced ketamine and ketamine analogues are used to intentionally improve mental health, however little is known about this in an Australian context.

Methods: The Australian Ketamine Survey recruited participants aged 18 or older, could read and understand English, living in Australia, who had used non-prescribed ketamine in Australia in the past 12-months. The survey was web-based and anonymous. Data collected included demographics, other drug use behaviour, and detailed measures related to ketamine use. This descriptive analysis focused on respondents reporting using ketamine to improve mental health.

Results: Between December 2025 and May 2026, 345 respondents were recruited, aged 18-69 (median=29, women=40.4%, non-binary=7.7%).

Eighty-eight (25.5%) reported ever using non-prescribed ketamine to improve mental health (71 in the past 12 months). Nearly all (91.5%) reported also using ketamine in other contexts.

The most common problems respondents reported aiming to improve were *anxiety or anxiety-like symptoms* (65.9%), *depression-like symptoms* (75.0%), and *general stress* (58.0%). Less than half (38; 43.2%) suggest that recent media coverage about the medical use of ketamine as a mental health treatment had informed their own use intended for this purpose. Only four (4.7%) respondents reported ever being prescribed ketamine as a mental-health related treatment. Nearly all (94.4%) respondents reported improvement of at least some symptoms.

Discussion and Conclusions: The results suggest a non-negligible proportion of people who use ketamine in Australia do so to address or improve their mental health. For many people, the non-prescribed use of ketamine in this context appears to be beneficial.

Implications: People may face barriers to accessing legal ketamine treatment for mental health indications. Further investigation into the motivations and experiences of people who use non-prescribed ketamine to improve mental health is warranted.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: Stassi Kypri receives an Australian Government Research Training Program scholarship which covers tuition fees, provides a stipend for living costs, and supports professional development. This project is funded by the National Centre for Clinical Research on Emerging Drugs (NCCRED). NCCRED receives funding via a research grant from the Department of Health, Disability, and Ageing (RG230617).