

Drug alerts in Australia: How do people who use drugs engage with alerts and what are their preferences for risk communications?

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Introduction: Drug warnings ('drug alerts') are increasingly being released by Australian health agencies to notify people of circulating higher-risk substances and promote harm reduction behaviours. This study examined engagement with and preferences for drug alert communications among people who use illegal drugs.

Method: People aged ≥ 18 who use illegal drugs in Australia completed an online survey from June-September 2023. The survey was designed in consultation with people who use drugs and people with expertise in alert dissemination systems.

Key Findings: Preliminary analyses showed that participants ($N=414$) were most commonly male and aged in their 30s. Most participants (87%) reported seeing/hearing about a drug alert. Over three-quarters of these had most recently seen an alert within the past year, often relating to MDMA, methamphetamine or cocaine. When asked about their preferences, 47% of participants thought future alerts should be triggered by peer reports of adverse drug effects. Around half indicated they were always interested in hearing about alerts, regardless of whether this related to their location or drugs they use. Seventeen percent indicated a preference for receiving alerts for specific drugs only, with 34% preferring to receive regular updates on local market trends and 45% preferring to receive both forms of communication.

Discussions and Conclusions: Drug alerts appeared to have extensive reach among our sample of people who use drugs, with potential to inform positive harm reduction behaviours. Many people want to receive information about market trends in addition to specific drug alerts, potentially indicating a need to extend existing communication.

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