

A survey study of ketamine benefits, harms, and harm reduction in Aotearoa New Zealand

Jai Whelan¹, Brin Ryder², Stassi Kypri^{3,4}, Rose Crossin¹

¹*Department of Public Health, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka | University of Otago, Ōtautahi | Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand*

²*Te Pokapū Aurorotanga | Centre for Early Learning in Medicine, Te Kaupeka Whaiora | Faculty of Medicine, Ōtākou Whakaihu Waka | University of Otago, Ōtepoti | Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand*

³*National Centre for Clinical Research on Emerging Drugs (NCCRED), University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia*

⁴*National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC), University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia*

Presenter's email: jai.whelan@otago.ac.nz; brin.ryder@otago.ac.nz

Introduction: Prevalence of nonmedical ketamine use and harms have increased internationally. However, little is known about ketamine use within Aotearoa New Zealand. This study aimed to characterise ketamine-related consequences, harms, benefits, and harm reduction behaviour among people who use ketamine nonmedically in Aotearoa.

Methods: An online survey was conducted between May 2025 and February 2026. Participants were aged ≥18 years, lived in Aotearoa and had used ketamine non-medically in the country in the past five years. Measures captured demographics, drug use history, and a range of ketamine use-related variables, including harm and benefit ratings across four wellbeing dimensions. Analyses were primarily descriptive.

Results: The final sample included 408 participants aged 18-76 (median = 29, IQR = 25-36). Among 366 reporting past-year ketamine use, 15.8% scored at or above the threshold for potential dependence. Commonly reported ketamine use-related symptoms/experiences in the past year included vomiting (14.0%), memory impairments (7.6%), and negative mood or behaviour changes (7.1%). Urinary symptoms were reported by 10.3% in the past year and half of those experiencing such symptoms believed they may be ketamine-related. Use of drug checking services regarding ketamine was reported by 43.6% of the total sample. Ninety-one percent of those who attended a drug checking service reported expanding understanding of ketamine harm reduction. Overall, 15.2% reported ever being harmed by their ketamine use (6.1% acute physical; 5.6% chronic psychological), while 69.9% reported experiencing benefits (47.3% acute psychological; 12.5% chronic psychological).

Discussion: A minority of people who use ketamine in Aotearoa reported harm-related symptoms or experiences of harm, while nearly one in six met criteria for potential dependence. The majority reported experience of benefits. Engagement with harm reduction was common but uneven across behavioural practices, although drug checking increased client harm reduction knowledge. The findings highlight opportunities for improving ketamine harm reduction in the community.

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.