

What is harm reduction and why is it important at music venues and events?

The principles of harm reduction accept that no matter the rigour of messaging around the individual risks and dangers of substance use, there will always be people who take or experiment with substances. As such, it is important to ensure that individual harms associated with substance use are minimised wherever possible.¹

Many people who use drugs recreationally do so only on occasions, and this use is often determined by the environment they are in. Music events, such as festivals, live concerts, Electronic Music Dance Events (EMDE's) and raves are often popular environments for substance use.^{2,3}

The types of settings and environments people are in often influences the types of substances they consume.⁴ Stimulant and psychedelic recreational drugs such as MDMA and ecstasy, are among those typically consumed at music events.⁵

Drug use at music events

People who frequent music festivals in Australia report higher levels of illicit drug use than those seen in the general population. A 2011 survey of festival goers found at minimum 52% had used illicit drugs at least once, 25% of which had done so in the previous month, comparatively to 42.6 % and 15.6 % respectively in the general population.^{6,7}

1. 'The Principles of Harm Reduction' Harm Reduction Coalition harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction
2. NIDA for Teens, 2015, 'Concerts and Drugs: Is there a way to reduce the Dangers' National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2015. teens.drugabuse.gov/blog/post/concerts-and-drugs-there-way-reduce-dangers
3. Miller, B, Holder, H, Voas, R, 'Environmental Strategies for Prevention of Drug use and Risks in Clubs' *Journal of Substance Misuse*, 14 (1), 2009.
4. Smirnov A, Najman J, Hayatbakhsh R, Plotnikov M, Wells H, Legosz M & Kemp R, 'Young Adults' trajectories of ecstasy use: A population Based Study' *Addictive Behaviour*, Vol 38, 2013.
5. Miller et al, 2009, *op. cit.*
6. Day N, Criss J, Griffiths B, Gujral SK, John-Leader F, Johnston J & Pit S, 'Music Festivals Attendees' illicit drug use, knowledge and practices regarding drug content and purity: a cross sectional survey' *Harm Reduction Journal*, 15 (1), 2018
7. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. *National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2016: detailed findings* [Internet]. Canberra, 2017. Available from: aihw.gov.au/reports/illicit-use-of-drugs/ndshs-2016-detailed/report-editions

Strategies that promote zero tolerance on drug use at music events, such as significant police presence, sniffer dogs, and random drug searches are not necessarily stopping festival goers from consuming drugs. This is supported by a recent study from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, which surveyed a group of people who regularly attend festivals. Approximately 70% stated that police presence does not deter them from using illicit substances at music festivals.⁸ Higher rates of consumption also indicate that patrons may be at increased risk of adverse events and harm.⁹ It also suggests they are potentially immune to the general messaging around the risks of drug use and that more targeted harm reduction information may be more effective in this population.¹⁰

Characteristics of substance use at music events

Illicit drug use

The types of substance consumed, and the way in which they are taken at music events and festivals, also carry risks. Drugs such as ecstasy and MDMA are commonly consumed by attendees of music events. The risks associated with the consumption of these substances include:

- high body temperatures
- dehydration
- increased heart rate and blood pressure
- anxiety
- irrational behaviour
- visual and auditory hallucinations.¹¹

Some of these effects can lead to behaviours such as excessive water consumption, which can be fatal – especially in first time users.¹² The effects of these drugs can also be exacerbated by the festival environment, with attendees consuming in larger amounts to keep their energy levels up, coupled with elevated activity levels. Environmental factors such as heat and sunstroke can lead to further overheating and dehydration.¹³

Many of the risks can be addressed or moderated by harm reduction strategies. Access to educational resources such as *Text the Effects* cards, hydration stations and chill out spaces can help.

8. Huges C, Moxham-Hall V, Ritter A, Weatherburn D & MacCoun R, 'The Deterrent effects of Australian street-level drug law enforcement on illicit drug offending at outdoor music festivals' *International Journal of Drug Policy*, Vol 41, 2017.

9. Day et al, 2018 *op. cit.*

10. *Ibid*

11. 'Drug Facts: Ecstasy' Alcohol and Drug Foundation, 2018 adf.org.au/drug-facts/ecstasy

12. *Ibid*

13. 'Drug use at music festivals' Recovery.org, 2017 recovery.org/topics/drug-use-music-festivals

Alcohol use

Alcohol is also widely consumed at music festivals. Alcohol licencing information will provide organisers with service guidelines and restrictions around alcohol consumption at these events. Organisers should also be aware of the impact that alcohol consumption can have on individuals who are also using other illicit substances.

Alcohol is a depressant, and when combined with stimulant drugs such as ecstasy, MDMA and amphetamines it often results in the effects of either or both substances being masked, leading to increased consumption and higher risks of overdose.¹⁴ Alcohol can also increase the dehydration risk associated with ecstasy use.¹⁵

Ensuring that staff are aware of these risks and are monitoring patrons' alcohol consumption is important. Appropriate communication between staff members is also essential to ensure that all are informed and aware of any high-risk individuals.

Substance identity and purity

The other stand out issue at music festivals is that the potency and purity of substances can be questionable. While this is always a risk when taking substances, it tends to be more common in environments where demand is high. Substances such as LSD, MDMA and ecstasy can be substituted with a range of different chemicals and can contain synthetic versions of the intended substance, which have much more serious risk profiles than more traditional illicit substances. This type of substitution has been demonstrated in international trials, and in a recent pill testing trial at a music event in Australia.¹⁶ Consumption of these chemicals was correlated with overdose in some cases.^{17,18}

Drug use and event environments

Research has demonstrated that the environment in which drugs are consumed can often dictate the impact that consumption will have on the individual, and their behaviour toward others. Studies have demonstrated that no matter the type of substance taken (including alcohol) violent, aggressive or anti-social behaviour is more common in environments that do not promote cohesion. Physical characteristics of environments that have been demonstrated to be linked to aggressive or anti-social behaviour with substance use are poor ventilation, unclean conditions, negative attitudes of staff, management and security, and a lack of 'chill out spaces' or areas that provide a comfort and respite.^{19,22}

Benefits of harm reduction at music events

There are many benefits to engaging in harm reduction strategies at music events.

Harm reduction strategies in these environments have significant reach. They target a broad sub-set of the population that is often immune to general health warnings about drug use, and as a result tend to be at higher risk of harm.^{20,21}

This is important as many people, especially young people, experiment with recreational drugs for the first time at these events. Harm reduction interventions at music events also provide an important opportunity for education and awareness around the risks associated with recreational drug use. This may potentially disrupt drug use paths, as education and awareness has been demonstrated as an important factor in moderating risky behaviour. These interventions present an opportunity to potentially influence the frequency, intensity and risks associated with future drug use in individuals.²²

14. 'Drug Facts: Amphetamines' Alcohol and Drug Foundation, 2018 adf.org.au/drug-facts/amphetamines

15. 'Drug Facts: Ecstasy' Alcohol and Drug Foundation, 2018 adf.org.au/drug-facts/ecstasy

16. Makkai T, Macleod M, Vumbaca G, Hill P, Caldicott D, Noffs M, Tzanetis S, Hansen F, *Report on Canberra GTM Harm Reduction Service*, Harm Reduction Australia, 2018.

17. Recovery.org, 2017 *op. cit.*

18. Makkai T, Macleod M, Vumbaca G, Hill P, Caldicott D, Noffs M, Tzanetis S, Hansen F, *Report on Canberra GTM Harm Reduction Service*, Harm Reduction Australia, 2018.

19. Miller et al, 2009 *op. cit.*

20. Miller et al, 2009 *op. cit.*

21. Sillins, E, Bleeker, AM, Simpson, M, Dillon, P & Copeland, J, 2013, 'Does peer-delivered information at music events reduce ecstasy and methamphetamine use at three month follow up? Findings from a quasi-experiment across three study sites' *Journal of Addiction Prevention*, Vol 1 (3), 2013.

22. Smirnov, A, Najman, J, Hayatbakhsh, R, Plotnikov, M, Wells, H, Legosz, M & Kemp, R, 2013, 'Young Adults' trajectories of ecstasy use: A population Based Study' *Addictive Behaviour*, Vol 38, 2013.

Engaging in suitable and evidence-based harm reduction strategies should be a priority for venue and event owners, managers and organisers, as the negative reputational consequences of adverse events such as overdose can cause substantial financial, legal and regulatory burden.²³

Harm reduction strategies

Harm reduction strategies at music events are numerous and diverse. They range from the provision of water stations and free water bottles at events, to providing 'pass outs' or chill out and sanctuary spaces. They can also include engaging with expert organisations, who provide harm reduction information services and pill testing. The more that is done to address harm reduction at events, the more successful the outcomes are.²⁴

Chill out and sanctuary spaces

Environmental approaches to harm reduction focus on changing the social and physical environment and offer management and organisers an approach to harm reduction that is built in to the design of events.

They focus on creating spaces (often called chill out or sanctuary spaces), which offer respite from the event, providing a quiet, calm, comfortable and shady space for patrons to relax. These might also be areas that provide hydration and food and can also be a good opportunity to provide health promotion information to patrons that address key issues specific to the event environment, such as information on common substances taken at these events and information on how to care for friends who might be using substances.

Chill out spaces are also key areas in which to engage in peer education interventions. Peer education about substance use and harm at music events is an effective way of reducing immediate harm, and potentially reducing future substance use.²⁵ Peer-to-peer education teams are often the first point of call for patrons experiencing distress and are of critical importance to ensure that individuals seek and obtain the treatment needed.²⁶

Chill out spaces should be clearly signposted and marked on festival and event maps and information about them should be shared in programs and promotional material.²⁷

Peer education programs

DanceWize is a peer education program run by Harm Reduction Victoria and NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA). It is volunteer lead and operates at dance parties, festivals, nightclubs and events.²⁸ **DanceWize** provide judgement-free chill out spaces where patrons can access accurate and credible information about drug and alcohol related harm, through both face-to-face discussion and resources, and support services. Volunteers are first aid trained, though patrons that need medical attention are referred to onsite health providers, such as St John Ambulance.

Event organisers can contact Harm Reduction Victoria to request the presence of [DanceWize](#) at their events.

save-a-mate is a health program run by Australian Red Cross, that provides peer-to-peer information services in urban, rural and remote areas. Trained volunteers utilise chill out spaces to identify and support people who are experiencing adverse reactions to substances.²⁹

Event organisers can contact [save-a-mate](#) via Australian Red Cross

23. Miller et al, 2009 *op. cit.*

24. 'Code of Practice for running safer music festival and events' Victorian Department of Health, 2013

25. Sillins E, Bleeker AM, Simpson M, Dillon P & Copeland J, 2013, 'Does peer-delivered information at music events reduce ecstasy and methamphetamine use at three month follow up? Findings from a quasi-experiment across three study sites' *Journal of Addiction Prevention*, Vol 1 (3), 2013.

26. Victorian Department of Health, 2011 *op. cit.*

27. 'Keeping Music Festival goes safe through Harm Reduction' Canadian Drug Policy Coalition, 2014 drugpolicy.ca/blog/2014/12/keeping-music-festival-goes-safe-through-harm-reduction

28. 'DanceWize' Harm Reduction Victoria, 2018 hrvic.org.au/dancewize

29. 'save-a-mate' Australian Red Cross, 2018 redcross.org.au/about-us/how-we-help/save-a-mate

Healthcare and first aid providers

St John Ambulance provide onsite healthcare and first aid services at events around Australia. St John team members are specifically trained to address issues that may arise from substance use at these events and can provide advice as well as medical treatment or assistance if needed.³⁰

Event organisers can contact [St John Ambulance](#) to request a service quote.

Staff and security training

Ensuring that festival staff and security are trained appropriately to deal with people who might be taking substance is important, as the attitudes of staff and security at events has been shown to be key in reducing the potential for anti-social or aggressive behaviour as a result of substance use.³¹ Staff should also be trained to recognise the signs and symptoms of overdose, and how to appropriately address these situations.

[Pennington Institute](#) run overdose awareness and first aid courses around Australia, more information is available on their website.

Potential strategies

Pill testing

Pill testing is becoming increasingly common at music festivals and events around the world, and pill testing organisations and not-for-profits currently provide services throughout Europe, the U.S and Canada. A recent trial in Australia demonstrated positive results, showing that only 43% of the substances tested contained significant amounts of the substance that the patron expected, the other 57% containing significant levels of other chemical agents.³² Around 40% of patrons who engaged in the pill testing trial chose to moderate their behaviour as a result of these findings, either stating that they would take less of the substance or would not take the substance at all.³³ Pill testing stations also provide another outlet for the dissemination and reiteration of harm reduction messaging. While this trial has shown positive impacts on substance use within the event environment, there is still significant legislative and political debate about the use of pill testing on a broader scale in Australia.

History has demonstrated that no matter the level of deterrence-based policy that is implemented around substance use at events, there will still be a proportion of people who consume substances. This results in an increased risk of harm, including potential overdose, at these events.

Harm reduction strategies play a key role in reducing the adverse impacts of substance use at these events. Evidence based methods should be a focus of event organising and planning to reduce harm associated with substance use.

30. St John Ambulance, 2018 stjohnvic.com.au/event-health-services/why-stjohn.asp

31. Miller et al, 2009 *op. cit.*

32. Makkai et al, 2018 *op. cit.*

33. *Ibid*

Services



St John Ambulance

1300 360 445

stjohn.org.au

Harm Reduction Australia

0408 244 552

harmreductionaustralia.org.au

Australian Red Cross save-a-mate

[redcross.org.au/about-us/how-we-help/
save-a-mate](http://redcross.org.au/about-us/how-we-help/save-a-mate)

Penington Institute

03 9650 0699

penington.org.au

YoDAA

1800 458 685

yodaa.org.au

YSAS

03 9415 8881

ysas.org.au

ADF Services

Drug Info

1300 85 85 84

Drug facts

adf.org.au/drug-facts

Text the effects

0439 TELL ME (0439 835 563)