

DANA Position Statement

Pill testing



OVERVIEW

The growth in new psychoactive substances and the ever-evolving chemical composition of drugs, coupled with the need to reduce the harms from substance use, supports the practice of pill testing. Pill testing is a harm reduction service (also known as drug checking) that analyses the contents of drugs to help avoid the unknown and potentially dangerous substances in illicit drugs.¹

Pill testing provides feedback to people on the content of illegal drugs, allowing them to make informed choices. Pill-testing kits or booths at venues where pills are known to be consumed help inform people about the content of illicit drugs. As equipment can test drugs in real time, people intending to take them can have them checked before consuming them.²

POSITION

DANA supports harm reduction measures, such as pill testing, that helps reduce the risks and harms of substance use.

EVIDENCE AND RATIONALE

The effectiveness of pill testing is supported by the evidence:

- Pill testing has been shown to change the black market. Products identified as particularly dangerous that subsequently became the subject of warning campaigns were found to leave the market.³
- Research shows that over time the ingredients of tested pills started to match the expected components. This suggests pill testing might be able to change the black market in positive ways.⁴
- Pill testing changes behaviour: research shows 50% of those who had their drugs tested said the results affected their consumption choices. Two-thirds said they wouldn't consume the drug and would warn friends in cases of negative results.³

¹ <https://www.health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/population-health/pill-testing>

² Ritter, A (2018) Six Reasons for pill testing https://www.drugpolicy.org.au/pill_testing

³ Inge P. Spruit (2001) Monitoring Synthetic MONITORING SYNTHETIC DRUG MARKETS, TRENDS, AND PUBLIC HEALTH, Substance Use & Misuse, 36:1-2, 23-47, DOI: 10.1081/JA-10000227

⁴ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2001) An inventory of on-site pill-testing interventions in the EU. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction Rua da Cruz de Sta. Apolónia, 23-25 P-1149-045 Lisbon, Portugal

- Visits to pill-testing booths create an opportunity for providing support and information over and above the testing itself. They enable drug services to contact a population that is otherwise difficult to reach.⁵
- The intervention has been used to establish contact and as the basis for follow-up work with members of not-yet-problematic, but nevertheless high-risk, groups of recreational drug users.⁴
- Pill testing enables the capture of long-term data about the actual substances present in drugs. It creates the potential for an early warning system beyond immediate users. This is becoming all the more important as new psychoactive substances that may be used as adulterants are appearing more frequently.⁶

DANA recognizes harm-reduction approaches to drug use is a balance between benefits and risks: the availability of pill testing reduces harm, but it may increase risks for some. Not everyone will use the service and some may ignore the results and risk being subject to potentially harmful drugs.¹

DANA supports further trials of pill testing to assess its benefits and harms so informed choice about this intervention.



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⁵ Hungerbuehler et al.(2011) Drug Checking: A prevention measure for a heterogeneous group with high consumption frequency and polydrug use - evaluation of Zurich's drug checking services. Harm Reduction Journal 2011 8:16.

⁶ Brunt, T. M., Poortman, A., Niesink, R. J., & van den Brink, W. (2011). Instability of the ecstasy market and a new kid on the block: mephedrone. Journal of Psychopharmacology, 25(11), 1543–1547.