

Ecstasy sold in US is less pure and more dangerous than in Europe, experts warn

Many US buyers unwittingly ingest a dangerous concoction of substances known as bath salts or other psychoactive substances instead, putting themselves at risk



There are so many substances being cut and sold as ecstasy that it's very difficult for drug safety advocates to keep up.
Photograph: Reuters

Olivia Solon in San Francisco

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The purity of drugs being sold as “molly” or “ecstasy” in the United States is dangerously poor compared to Europe, experts say, with many buyers unwittingly putting themselves at risk by ingesting a random and dangerous concoction of substances known as bath salts or other new psychoactive substances.

“Popping a pill always carries risks, but it’s different risks depending on what side of the Atlantic you are on,” explained Adam Winstock, an addiction psychiatrist and founder of the Global Drug Survey, who is calling for better drug education among the American public.

While Europe faces a flood of high-potency ecstasy pills, the US has the opposite problem: pills or powders sold as “ecstasy” or “molly” that contain very little or no MDMA, the active ingredient associated with the drug. According to data collected from a range of sources, anywhere between 30% and 60% of what is being sold as molly or ecstasy in the USA is not

in fact MDMA.

The rest is made up of mostly synthetic cathinones such as methyldone, butylone and ethylone (nicknamed bath salts), that are designed to mimic the effects of MDMA. Other drugs found in pills and powders include: ketamine, a powerful tranquilizer; methamphetamine, a powerful synthetic stimulant; PMA or PMMA, or “Dr Death”; and alpha-PVP, known as flakka or the Florida zombie drug). There are also less controversial ingredients such as aspirin and caffeine.

“We don’t really see MDMA any more,” said a Drug Enforcement Agency spokesman. “You might have a little MDMA in there, but we are seeing a whole slew of other synthetic drugs.”

There are so many substances being cut and sold as ecstasy that it’s very difficult for drug safety advocates to keep up. EcstasyData, one of a handful of public drug-testing programs in the world, tested 528 samples of ecstasy in 2015 and found 111 different substances within those samples.

“It’s a pretty scary situation. We don’t know a lot about these new drugs. Young kids, good kids who just want to party once in a while, are unintentionally taking cocktails of these novel drugs. We don’t know what they do and how they interact with each other,” said Joseph Palamar, a drug researcher at NYU who has been surveying and testing people taking drugs at festivals and nightclubs.

“We’re not saying it’s safer to take ecstasy, but at least we have decades of research on the drug,” he added.

The problem appears to stem from a combination of factors, including a rise in inexperienced recreational drug takers and stricter drug policy in the US that makes it harder to import the right chemicals to make real MDMA. Those restrictions also make it harder for venues and drug user advocacy groups to implement drug checking and other harm reduction measures.

“It’s very clear that people are taking a lot of very new research chemicals thinking they are MDMA,” said Mitchell Gomez, national outreach director of DanceSafe, a harm-reduction organization.

Drug users typically weigh the risks and dosage of a given substance before taking it. “If someone concludes that they are willing to take a particular drug, then it’s important that what they put into their body is what they’ve been researching,” he said.



The fact that people tend to combine drugs makes the situation more complex. Photograph: Nick Ut/AP

The fact that people tend to combine drugs makes the situation more complex. For example, a relatively common combination is taking MDMA with LSD, known as “candyflipping”. However, given the rise of synthetic substitutes, a person may unwittingly be taking an entirely different cocktail of less well understood drugs.

“Instead of hundreds of thousands of users who have used that combination for many years, maybe they are the first person. We have no idea what will happen,” Gomez said. “Adulterated markets radically change the risk profile of drug taking.”

Rise of EDM

The issue is compounded by the explosion in popularity of electronic dance music (EDM) in America. “The scene has got larger, the average age has got younger, and the level of education has got worse,” Gomez explained. Like it or not, ecstasy and dance music go hand in hand.

In the past - before the rise of earworm-generating super DJs such as Avicii, Skrillex and David Guetta - the rave scene was relatively tight-knit and it was harder to find the parties and drugs without already knowing people in the scene.

“Now we have these events with multimillion-dollar advertising budgets with billboards in major cities and ads on MTV,” Gomez said. This means that there’s a surge in inexperienced drug users buying poor quality substances from strangers and not realizing they don’t contain any MDMA.

“There’s not as much of a community as there was in the club scene,” adds Palamar, who points out that for 19-year-old suburban kids going to a festival for the first time, their only option for buying drugs might be a “shady stranger”.

The problem of adulterated ecstasy could be mitigated through harm-reduction measures such as allowing organizations like DanceSafe to offer their drug-checking service at venues to help people know which pills and powders to avoid.

The Rave Act

However, thanks to a piece of 2003 legislation dubbed the Rave Act, promoters are discouraged from providing chill-out zones, free water and pill testing for fear of being seen as promoting drug use. The act makes it easier for prosecutors to fine and imprison business owners, property owners and rave promoters for failing to prevent drug-related offences committed by their customers.



The problem appears to stem from a combination of factors, including a rise in inexperienced recreational drug takers and stricter drug policy in the US that makes it harder to import the right chemicals to make real MDMA. Photograph: Alamy Stock Photo

With the commercialization of EDM has come big budgets and nervous teams of attorneys worried about liability.

“You need water and places to sit down if you are dancing for hours to avoid overheating, yet venues are scared to provide these,” Palamar said. “Even allowing testing could be viewed as an admission that drug use is going on at a venue and the Rave Act could be used to shut it down,” Palamar said.

DanceSafe is one of the organizations pushing for the Rave Act to be overturned, arguing that it’s impossible for venues to eliminate drugs. “If you can’t keep drugs out of jail where they do cavity searches and X-rays, then you can’t expect promoters to keep them out of venues. It’s absurd,” Gomez said.

“If you can accept that no matter what you do there’s going to be incidental use, then I don’t think that acknowledging it and trying to mitigate risks is promotion of drug use any more than putting a seatbelt in a car encourages speeding.”

America’s ‘war on drugs’

It’s not just clubs that face stricter legal penalties in the US than in Europe. Black-market drug manufacturers also face much harsher consequences if caught in the US. Most of the key ingredients or “precursors” used to make MDMA are produced in China and south-east Asia, while production has typically taken place in Europe, meaning a steady supply of high potency MDMA has been available on the continent. But in the US, importers have been drawn towards less well-regulated MDMA substitutes that are cheaper and also more likely to fall under the DEA’s radar.

“If you’re manufacturing MDMA in the US, you have to fly bulky and easily detected precursors into the country. In Europe you can put the precursor on a train in Asia and pick it up in Europe. Plus most EU countries only have a small budget to put towards drug war,” Mitchell said.

To better understand this phenomenon and other drug trends in the US, Winstock is calling for more Americans to respond anonymously to the 2017 Global Drug Survey. More than 100,000 people participated in last year’s research.

“People in the US have good prescription drugs, are moderate drinkers, smart cannabis users, but poorly discerning MDMA users,” Winstock said. “The market has been

adulterated for so long they wouldn't know good MDMA if it smacked them on the head.”

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