

DRUG AWARENESS

February's warm summer evenings are a great time for getting out and about around Canberra. Unfortunately, some people associate partying with drug use and this can lead to serious problems.

There is nothing "recreational" about taking potentially harmful illicit drugs such as ecstasy or amphetamines, although we do still hear some people describe these substances in this way. Language can help shape opinions and attitudes and for this reason police discourage describing harmful and illegal drugs as being recreational.

The use of illegal drugs can have numerous negative effects. Intelligence shows that if illicit drugs are brought into Australia, criminal networks distribute the drugs into the cities, including Canberra. Sales are conducted by local drug dealers, who often prey on vulnerable people. The users may then turn to crime to meet the cost of addiction.

Illegal drugs generally fall under three main categories:

- Depressants
- Stimulants
- Hallucinogens

Prescription drugs can also fall under these categories. When prescribed by a doctor and used in accordance with the doctor's instructions, these drugs are legal. When stolen or fraudulently obtained, the possession, distribution or use of these drugs becomes illegal.

One common example is benzodiazepines (for example, Valium, Serepax, Mogadon, Temazepam - with street names like downers and slow). Other examples are barbiturates (for example, varieties of sleeping pills) and synthetic derivatives of narcotic analgesics (often varieties of very strong painkillers).

How illegal drugs affect you

It's important to remember that illegal drugs are not manufactured in controlled environments – you never know what quality and quantity you are really getting, or with what an unscrupulous dealer may have diluted the drug with.

Some of the side effects of illegal drugs could actually limit your ability to have the 'good time' you might have thought the drug was going to provide. The side-effects multiply, compound and can cause permanent damage the more frequently you take the drugs. Side effects include:

- confusion
- anxiety
- paranoia

- panic attacks
- nausea
- shaking
- headache
- schizophrenic and psychotic behaviour
- hostile and aggressive behaviour
- violence, often for no apparent reason
- periods of severe mental and emotional disturbance, and possible permanent mental illness, and
- potentially permanent damage to brain, liver, kidneys and heart.

The wider community suffers not only the burden of drug-related crime, but also the additional cost on the health system. The impact of drug taking can ripple through the entire community.

To tackle drug use and its consequences, the ACT Policing Early Intervention and Diversion program is designed to provide early incentives for drug offenders to deal with their drug problems. Youth offenders without prior involvement with the courts are targeted by the intervention programs and are given the opportunity of diversion to education and treatment options. The program is part of a partnership between health, police and non-government agencies, adhering to the principles of the National Drug Strategy. Further information is available on the AFP's website at www.afp.gov.au.

What to do in an emergency

If you are concerned that someone you know may have a drug problem, there are many support agencies who offer advice and assistance. The Red Cross's "Save a Mate" program has been operating since late 1999 to prevent and reduce the harms associated with substance use, particularly among young people. The program focuses specifically on the potential emergencies that may arise as a result of alcohol and other drug use.

Many alcohol and drug emergencies are witnessed by someone else. If you see someone who you think may be suffering as a result of drug or alcohol use – symptoms include collapse, fitting, vomiting and unconsciousness – contact 000 for help immediately.

SOURCE: ACT Policing