

New research uncovers support for pill testing in the Northern Territory

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A new study led by Menzies School of Health Research has uncovered strong support from Northern Territory (NT) festival goers, for drug checking (also known as pill testing) to reduce harm.

Published last week in *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, the study analysed responses from 539 participants, as part of a survey that is conducted annually at a NT music festival.

When measuring attitudes and intended behaviours towards drug checking, it found that the majority of people surveyed supported the option for people to test their drugs prior to events. The majority of survey participants also said they would feel safer if a testing service was available.

As a result, this multi-institute, collaborative study provides valuable insights into local needs and attitudes of the NT population. The study recommended further exploration of the potential role of a drug checking services in the Northern Territory as a safe, evidence-based, publicly-supported mechanism to protect against drug-related harms.

Previous research has shown that reducing harms from drugs requires a holistic approach. This means measures that keep people safer while using, in addition to strategies that regulate the market as well as treatment and education.

Evidence also suggests that offering these services does not lead to increased drug use or increased intention to use, but rather helps to lessen the potential of adverse consequences.

Drug checking is an evidence-based harm reduction intervention, implemented safely in more than 20 countries worldwide. It has been demonstrated to reduce avoidable harms including deaths.

In Australia, it is increasingly recognised as a valuable tool for reducing harms, following two successful trials at an ACT festival and the trial of a fixed site service in Canberra. In addition to this, mobile and fixed site pill testing services have been recently announced in Queensland.

The findings of the study, titled: *Safe beats down under: investigating the support of drug checking at a regional festival in the Northern Territory, Australia*, can be read in full online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09687637.2024.2330938>

Quotes attributable to senior author of the study, researcher from Menzies School of Health Research, [Dr Cassandra Wright](#):

“Our study suggests that there is enough demand and appetite to look at pill testing as a viable and empirically backed way to protect people from harms.

“It’s not enough to tell people to not use drugs. We know from decades of research that if we want to reduce harms, we need measures that keep people safe while using.”

Quotes attributable to co-lead of the study, researcher from Griffith University, Dr Timothy Piatkowski:

“Our research, the first of its kind at a music festival in the NT, reveals widespread support across age groups with preferences for onsite pill testing at festivals and events.

“It reminds us of the vital role of harm reduction efforts to support people in making well-informed choices.”

Quotes attributable to study partner, MusicNT Executive Director, Mark Smith:

“Protecting people from harm and ensuring everyone can enjoy live music are key goals for MusicNT through the All Good Project.

“Undertaking on-the-ground research at one of NT’s live music festivals demonstrates that the attitudes of NT concert goers’ echoes that of audiences across the nation. We applaud Menzies for this vital piece of work and encourage governments to engage in forthright conversations around implementing pill testing to protect future festival audiences.”

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Media contact:

Phone: (08) 8946 8680 | Email: media@menzies.edu.au

Menzies School of Health Research

Menzies is one of Australia’s leading medical research institutes dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, and a leader in global and tropical research into life-threatening illnesses. Menzies continues to translate research into effective partnerships and programs in communities across Australia and the Asia-Pacific region.

Fast Facts: Drug checking / pill testing

- Illicit drug use is common in Australia. This study uncovered, 2 out of 5 people reported use of illicit drugs in the past month.
- The use of illicit drugs is prohibited, which means the supply of drugs is unregulated and can be unsafe.
- Unsafe supply of drugs can be due to excessive purity in batches, adulteration/additives (e.g. adding fentanyl to methamphetamines) and mislabelling/one drug being sold as another (e.g. ketamine sold as cocaine), or the emergence of novel psychoactive substances in the illicit drug market for which there is little data.
- Harm reduction measures like drug checking provide people with information so that they can make an informed decision on whether to use or not.
- Other harm reduction measures like access to non-judgemental, evidence-based drug information and safer using strategies, and the national Prompt Response Network drug surveillance system provide information to educate users and alert them to drugs that are causing harms.