

The impact of positive and negative ecstasy-related information on ecstasy use among college students: Results of a longitudinal study

MAJOR FINDINGS:

The researchers had two goals when they began this study. They hoped to “estimate the proportion of [college] students exposed to specific types of information regarding the positive and negative effects of ecstasy” and to explore the relationship between exposure to the messages and subsequent ecstasy use.

The table below lists some of the messages the students had been exposed to and the percentage of students who heard them. As can be seen, many of the negative statements had been heard by nearly all of the students. By the time students had their junior-year interview with the research study, 32 students (6.7%) had used ecstasy at least once in their lives. During the two-year interval between freshman and junior year 21 students used ecstasy for the first time and most (61.9%) only used it once or twice.

The researchers were surprised to find that students who heard a greater number of negative messages about ecstasy use were significantly more likely to use the drug, whereas the number of positive messages heard was unrelated to subsequent use. They speculate that this could be because experienced drug users probably know more about the negative effects and might seek out more information.

Practice and Policy Suggestions: The messages that students reported hearing are consistent with the information used during informational campaigns during the late 1990’s and early 2000’s, although the researchers did not ask where the students heard the messages. This could mean that the information was successfully disseminated by the campaigns; however, because the negative messages clearly did not stop students from using ecstasy, it appears that this type of anti-drug use campaign might not have been effective. “On the contrary, at least two messages were associated with an increased risk for ecstasy use (“ecstasy puts holes in your brain” and “ecstasy can cause Parkinson’s disease”). Moreover, exposure to more negative information about ecstasy had no apparent effect on perceived harm.” This could be because the students who are seeking out this information are already at risk of trying ecstasy because their friends use drugs or because they are curious about using the drug.

Of major interest to:

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



Exposure to Positive and Negative Information About Ecstasy

% who ever heard this message

Negative Statements

Ecstasy can cause you to do stupid things.	93.3
Ecstasy can kill you.	89.3
Ecstasy can give you brain damage.	87.7
Ecstasy puts holes in your brain	48.1
Ecstasy costs too much money.	36.2
Ecstasy can cause Parkinson's disease.	12.5
Mean (SD) Number of Negative Statements	3.7 (1.0)

Positive Statements

Ecstasy makes you feel wonderful.	79.0
Ecstasy lets you enjoy life/ parties/ dancing.	74.7
Ecstasy makes you forget about all of the bad things in life.	45.4
Ecstasy makes you connect with people.	41.6
Mean (SD) Number of Positive Statements	2.4 (1.3)

(Practice and policy suggestions continued): The researchers did find that the message that “Ecstasy makes you do stupid things” might be effective in protecting against ecstasy use. This message is different from the other negative messages in that it implies an “a negative consequence that is both immediate and socially undesirable.” This consequence might also sound more credible to a student because it seems more likely to occur than the more severe or physically harmful consequences. Prevention professionals should bear in mind these and other lessons learned from previous prevention efforts when planning future drug prevention strategies for college students.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Vincent, K.B., Caldeira, K.M., O’Grady, K.E., Wish, E.D., Arria, A.M. (2010). The impact of positive and negative ecstasy-related information on ecstasy use among college students: Results of a longitudinal study. *Drugs: Education, Prevention & Policy*. 17(3), 232-247.



About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college. A full description of the methods used is available.¹ Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit www.cls.umd.edu or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland, College Park, at aarria@umd.edu.

¹ Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., O’Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Fitzelle, D.B., Johnson, E.P., Wish, E.D. (2008). Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study. *Substance Abuse*, 29(4), 19-38.

This research brief was prepared by Ilana Yergin, University of Maryland School of Journalism

