



The Victorian Drug Checking Service

Nexus presentation April 2025

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Partnership of

YSAS



The Loop
Australia



I acknowledge the Traditional
Owners of the land we meet on
and pay my respects to Elders
past and present.



History of drug checking

- 30 Drug Checking services in operation worldwide
- Pill testing/Drug checking- interchangeable but mean the same thing
- Fixed site, Event based and postal models
- ACT <https://cantest.com.au/>
- Queensland <https://www.quihn.org/how-we-help/cheqpoint-drug-checking-service/get-your-drugs-checked/>
- Our neighbours over the water <https://knowyourstuff.nz/>

Research shows drug checking services work to reduce harm

- A 2023 evaluation of the Australian Capital Territory drug checking service, CanTEST, revealed only 53% of substances tested matched the expected drug. For those where an additional drug, a different drug or an inconclusive result was found, one-third reported that they 'definitely will not' use the drug.
- A study at English festivals found the rate of onsite medical incidents and hospitalisations from accidental drug harm is significantly lower at festivals that provide pill testing services compared to those that don't.
- Police and medical services at a UK festival attributed a 95% decrease in drug-related hospital admissions to pill testing services.
- In a 2022 study, 86% of consumers in Portugal and 69% in the UK didn't consume the drug when test results indicated the drug was different than expected.

(References to above can be found here: <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/alcohol-and-drugs/victorias-pill-testing-trial>)

Background to Victoria Drug Checking Service

- Many years of advocacy for drug checking in Victoria
- At the beginning of 2024, Victorian paramedics responding to more drug overdoses at festivals in the first 3 months of the year than during all of 2023.
- In mid- 2024, The Victorian Premier, Jacinta Allan and Minister for Mental Health Ingrid Stitt announced a trial of a drug checking service in Victoria
- Funded through Victoria Department of Health Supported by Victoria Police
- Implementation trial
- The service is one of Victoria's health-led initiatives to reduce drug harms.



This was published 8 months ago

Pill testing to become permanent in Victoria



Rachel Eddie

June 25, 2024 — 11:08am



69

Pill testing will be permanent in Victoria, with an 18-month trial to determine the best model to introduce the drug reform that Mental Health Minister Ingrid Stitt says is already backed by evidence.

A mobile site will visit up to 10 festivals across two summers from this December, and a fixed site within a party district in Melbourne will open from mid-next year. The location and specific events were yet to be determined.



Environment Climate crisis Indigenous Australia Immigration Media Business Health Science Tech

This article is more than 8 months old

Victoria to trial pill testing as a 'commonsense way to save lives', Jacinta Allan says

Premier announces state will trial pill testing during summer festival season, saying evidence shows it 'works'

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Victorian Premier Jacinta Allan confirms pill testing trial at festivals, events

A state premier has just announced a bold new trial she says will save young people's lives at festivals and concerts, while insisting the policy doesn't legalise drugs.

Duncan Evans and Blake Antrobus

2 min read June 24, 2024 - 10:02PM NewsWire



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The Royal Melbourne Hospital

HAPM Education

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Overview of the Project

- YSAS, HRVic, The Loop Australia + Melbourne Health and Youth Projects
- 18 months project – 10 festivals + fixed site opening in mid-2025
- “Implementation Pilot” – we know it works, but we’re learning how to best do this in different settings



Drug Checking and the Law

- Only State/Territory in Australia to offer legal protections
- Changes to the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981 provides protections for the services, for its staff, and for its clients – so no one is breaking the law by operating or using the Drug checking service.
- Personal amount of unregulated drugs
 - Must be less than a trafficable quantity- protected from prosecution when in the 'Drug checking place'
 - People can still be arrested outside the service – there is no special protective bubble

Regulations to operate a DCS

- Permit to operate- held by The Loop Australia
- Drug Checking Directors and board 'Fit and Proper person' test
- Special Drug Checking workers
- General Drug Checking workers
- Strict record keeping / data management processes
- Health Regulation inspections



Principles

- Anonymous and confidential- People can choose whether or not they want to give us their private information
- Judgement free and autonomy of choice
- Credible and accurate information
- Evidence-based information
- Harm Reduction
- Young people under 18 can access
- People need to be able to provide informed consent





Portable gas chromatography mass spectroscopy (GC-MS)	Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR)
Mobile/festival primary techniques	
Quantitative and qualitative This is the standard technique to detect unknown drug samples Electron ionization is standard across instruments allowing the creation of libraries (Griffin library has 270,000 compounds, and is highly regarded instrument)	Qualitative Identifies major components of a sample by comparing spectra to libraries (TLA currently has library of 6433 samples) Able to identify the majority of samples that will come to the service but unable to detect components <5% of the sample
Portable Developed for harsh environments	Portable Laboratory instrument that is useable in the field
Separates (GC) + measures (MS) GC separates the components of the sample MS measures them individually	Quick and simple (~1 minute) No sample preparation required
GC-MS by many drug checking services worldwide. Portable GC-MS has been used by Substance in Canada and in the RAPID project at festivals.	"The standard" drug checking instrument around the world. Allows easy sharing of data between services, allowing rapid library updates.



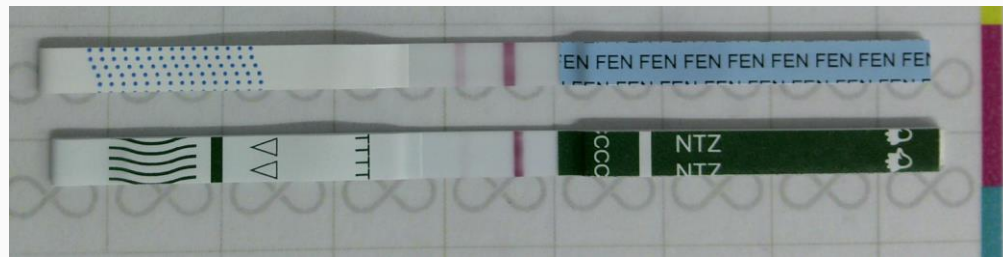
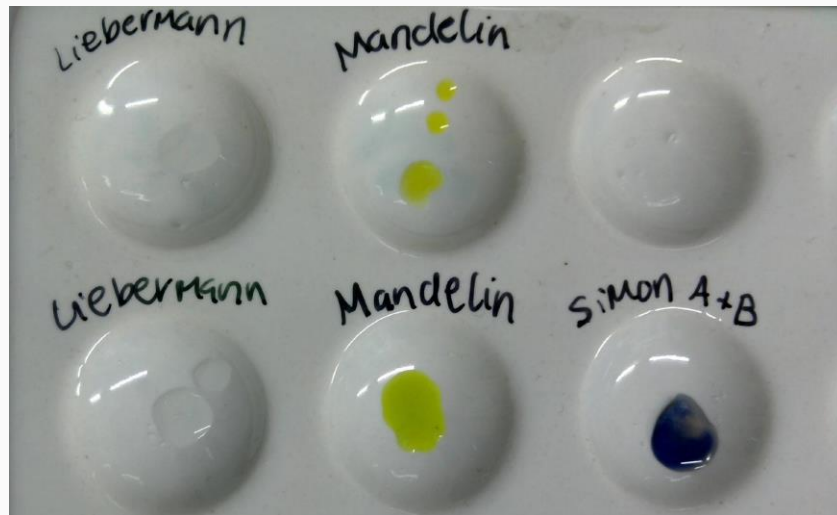
Portable gas chromatography mass spectroscopy (GC-MS)	Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR)
Mobile/festival primary techniques	
<p>To be used for any sample where we can't get a good match on FTIR (e.g. benzos, pharmaceuticals, or anything that looks unusual on FTIR)</p> <p>Also able to quantify MDMA tablet dosage.</p>	<p>To be used on pretty much every sample, except for LSD.</p> <p>Can't quantify – but can identify major components. Main component, and secondary component (sometimes a third component).</p> <p>Results can be described in terms of how confident we are – high, medium or low confidence based on the score (max score is 999)</p>

Reagent and Test Strips

These can help us to rule things in / out.

We have the full range of reagents + fentanyl and nitazene test strips.

We have a protocol around which substances will be tested with fentanyl / nitazene test strips – but we'll also use them if a client requests it.



What can we test

- We can test most substances in pill, capsule, powder, crystal, rock, blotter, paper or liquid form.
- We can't test plants, edibles, or very diluted substances.
- Messaging to patrons: If you're not sure if we can test your substance, come chat with us.



How does it work- Events

One day events

1. Arrival & Introduction
 - A team member explains the process.
 - Disclaimer read and signed/demographics completed
 - Patron gets a unique ID.
2. Sample Drop-Off and Analysis
 - Patron tells a chemist about their sample(s).
 - Patron can bring multiple samples The chemist will take a photo and take a tiny amount
 - The sample/s are analysed in front of the patron. One sample usually takes about 15 minutes.
3. Results & Advice
 - A harm reduction team member will give advice based on your sample and situation.
 - This conversation is private, confidential and non-judgmental.
 - If a patron wants to safely dispose of any remaining substances, we can help

Multiday events

1. Arrival and introduction
 - A team member explains the process.
 - Disclaimer read and signed/demographics completed
 - Patron gets a unique ID. They need this to pick up results later
2. Sample drop off and analysis
 - Patron tells a chemist about their sample(s).
 - Patron can bring multiple samples The chemist will take a photo and take a tiny amount
 - They'll give an estimated time to pick up the results.
3. Results pick up and advice
 - A harm reduction team member will explain the results and give advice based on your sample and situation.
 - This conversation is private, confidential and non-judgmental.
 - If a patron wants to safely dispose of any remaining substances, we can help

Disclaimer

Patrons read and sign a disclaimer that covers:

- No drug use is totally safe. The safest option is not to take drugs
- We aim to give you credible and non-judgemental advice related to the test results for the substance you provide. We will offer to discuss substance use more generally, and ways that you can reduce the risk of harm. This discussion is voluntary. You do not have to answer any questions that you are not comfortable answering.
- The decisions you make before and after accessing our service are up to you. We take no responsibility for actions or events that occur after using this service. Our service operates under an exemption from civil liability, which may limit your ability to make a legal claim against the service.
- On-site testing may not be 100% accurate. We will use a number of testing methods to get the best information possible about what is in your substance. However, there may be other substances present in your sample that we cannot detect.
- The purity and contents of drugs can vary between batches that look similar, and even within the same batch. We can only find out what is in the exact sample you submit. Results should not be generalised to any other substances that might be circulating, even if they look the same or are from the same batch.

If you have any questions about the limitations of the testing equipment or anything else to do with our service, please feel free to talk with our team.



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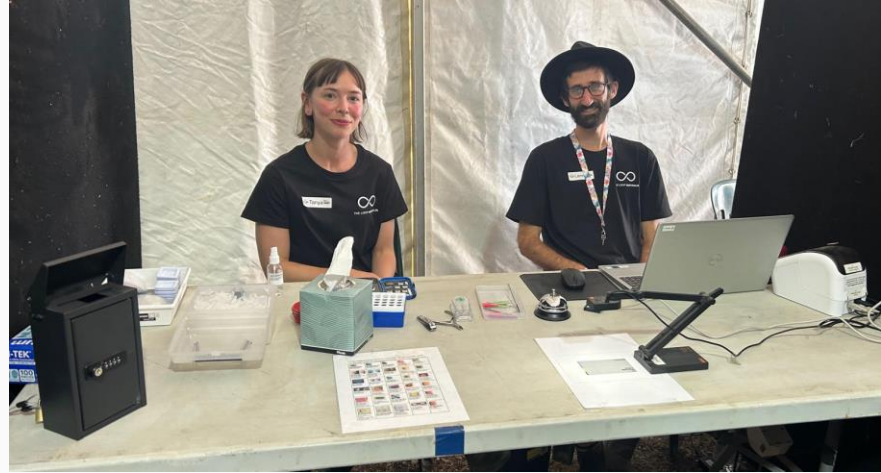
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Sample drop off

- Note the time
- What were you told the sample was?
- Have you already tried it?
- If yes, have / friend had a bad experience?
- Why did you bring this for testing?
- Photograph the drug, weigh the sample (including weighing full pill if available- quantification), log the sample



Sample size needed



This is all we need to test. We describe this in various ways:

- 10mg
- 1/10th of a point
- Size of a matchstick head

Results collection and Harm Reduction conversations

- Have you ever used the [drug type]?
 - How recently?
 - How often?
 - How much?
 - Usual route of administration?
 - Do you usually mix other drugs with this?
-
- Any physical / mental health concerns?
 - Current medications?
 - Current over-the-counter meds?
-
- **Then we deliver results and harm reduction advice**

Sample origin questions

- reminder these are not compulsory
- These questions are designed to help us know whether and how to do an alert

Wrap up & next steps

- We document actions the client might take
- E.g. use less, tell their friends
- We ask if they have any other concerns with alcohol, tobacco, vaping, other drugs
- Referrals available

How does it work- Fixed site

- Flow is as per one day events- with samples being tested without service user leaving and returning later
- Equity of access
- Greater linkage to health systems- AOD treatment, physical and mental health
- High tech instruments that are not feasible for use in the field
- It will operate from inner Melbourne, close to nightlife and transport.
- Opening Mid-2025

Frequently asked questions

What is Drug Checking?

How does it work?

How long does it take?

Do the providers have experience in delivering these services?

Who are the providers?

What hours will the service be operational at Pitch?

What substances can these machines check?

What is Harm Reduction Information?

What happens if someone overdoses at the festival?

What happens if a dangerous substance is found?

Will I need to use my ID?

How will police operate during the festival?

Will it still be illegal to use or deal drugs near the service?

Are there safeguards to stop police from targeting people using the service?

Will police be present at the service?

Will people be arrested for using the service?



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Three events into the trial

- Beyond The Valley Festival
 - Multiday event
 - 28th December 2024 to 1st January 2025
 - 35,000 patrons
- Hardmission Festival
 - One day event
 - 8th February 2025
 - 5,000 patrons
- Pitch Music Festival
 - Multiday event
 - 7-10th March 2025
 - 13,000 patrons



** with two remaining this season- Ultra Music Festival on 12th April and The Warehouse Project on 25th April

A short video about multiday events

- <https://youtu.be/T2azqWN8B0k>



Alerts and Public reports

- Urgent Alerts
- General Notifications (Community notices)
- Stakeholder notifications
- Statewide Linkage
- Public reports
 - Beyond the Valley
https://www.theloop.org.au/_files/ugd/d18f30_1faf62a73e564d3fbb0bd55df1dd82db.pdf
 - Hardmission About to be published



Recent General notifications

High-dose ecstasy tablets in hot conditions



Tablets with unexpectedly high dosage of MDMA – including a yellow 'SpongeBob' pill – may be circulating in Victoria

MDMA ('ecstasy') is an empathogen stimulant with effects including euphoria and increased sociability, but also increased body temperature, heart rate and blood pressure.

Recent testing of a 'SpongeBob' pill (pictured) in Victoria found the pill contained an **unexpectedly high dosage** of MDMA. The tablet is **yellow** in colour with **white and orange flecks**.



Using MDMA in hot conditions will increase the risk of life-threatening hyperthermia

Consuming MDMA increases your **core body temperature**. A larger dose can

4-CMC in white or off-white crystal form being sold as MDMA



4-CMC is a 'cathinone' that may produce unpredictable effects

Recent testing of 3 separate samples in Victoria all believed to be MDMA, were found to contain 4-CMC. The samples were all in the form of crystals that were white, or off-white in colour.

4-Chloromethcathinone (4-CMC) is a type of stimulant called 'cathinone', also known as clephedrone.

Not much is known about 4-CMC. In general, cathinones produce some similar effects to MDMA but appear to have a higher risk of producing unpredictable effects. Cathinones are most likely to be sold as or mixed into MDMA, but also sometimes cocaine or methamphetamine/speed.

4-CMC may produce more anxiety and less euphoria than MDMA

Compared to MDMA, 4-CMC appears to produce **more stimulating effects** that last for **longer**. It also appears to produce **less euphoric, psychedelic and emotional effects**. This means if people are expecting MDMA effects they may take more, increasing the risk of negative experiences and toxicity.

Higher doses of cathinones can lead to longer periods of unwanted effects following the initial stimulating ('high') effects. Usually, these unwanted side-effects include sleeplessness and muscle twitching, increased risk of agitation, paranoia and hallucinations, and toxic effects such as overheating and heart problems.

Mixing cathinones with other drugs can have **unpredictable effects** and **increase the risk of harm**. Mixing them with other stimulants such as speed, methamphetamine, MDMA or cocaine – can increase the risk of cardiac events like heart strain which can lead to a stroke.

Questions?

Further information:

- <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/alcohol-and-drugs/victorias-pill-testing-trial>
- <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/pill-testing-service>
- <https://www.health.vic.gov.au/news/next-festivals-and-events-for-victorias-pill-testing-service>
- https://www.vaada.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/REP_drug-checking-principles-of-practice_29042024.pdf
- <https://theknow.org.au/>

THANK YOU!

Thank you to the Victorian
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Thank you to all the people
who
advocated for Drug checking
in Victoria

Thank you to the patrons
who use our service

