

Initiation of illicit drug use in the FLUX cohort of Australian gay and bisexual men

Prestage GP¹, Hammoud M¹, Maher L¹, Degenhardt L², Bourne A³, Lea T⁴, Mackie B⁵, Bath N⁵, Haire B¹, Batrouney C⁶, Jin F¹

¹The Kirby Institute, UNSW, Sydney;

²The national Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW, Sydney;

³The Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society, La Trobe University, Melbourne;

⁴The Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW, Sydney;

⁵AIDS Council New South Wales, Sydney;

⁶Victorian AIDS Council, Melbourne.

Background: Drug use is more prevalent among gay and bisexual men (GBM) than in the general population, but few studies have reported incidence rates in this population. In an online cohort of GBM, we report the incidence of initiation of: amyl nitrite, cannabis, ecstasy, methamphetamine, cocaine, ketamine, and gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB).

Methods: Between 2014-2017, 1710 men enrolled in the Flux cohort study of drug use among GBM; by Dec 2017, 1273 men reported their drug use during at least one follow-up survey round. Incidence of initiation was calculated in those with no history of use at baseline who reported recent (previous 6-month) use during follow-up, and “no-use” in those who reported recent use at baseline and no use during any of the follow-up intervals.

Results: Median age was 31 years (range:16.5-81) and 34.1% reported that half or more of their gay friends used drugs. During 24 months of follow-up, the rates of initiation per 100 person-years were: 3.1 (methamphetamine); 2.0 (ketamine); 2.5 (GHB); 3.9 (cocaine); 5.0 (ecstasy); 8.8 (amyl nitrite); 7.4 (cannabis). Initiation of each of these drugs was significantly associated with younger age. Among men aged 25 or less, initiation rates were: 4.9 (methamphetamine); 3.2 (ketamine); 3.5 (GHB); 6.0 (cocaine); 9.3 (ecstasy); 12.6 (amyl nitrite); 9.8 (cannabis). Men who initiated use of one drug type were more likely to initiate other drugs, and this was especially pronounced for methamphetamine. Among men who initiated methamphetamine use, many also initiated: cocaine (36.6%); GHB (20.8%); ketamine (25.5%); amyl (26.3%).

Conclusion: Rates of initiation of illicit drugs are high among GBM in Australia, particularly among younger men. Men who initiate methamphetamine use are very likely to also initiate other drugs. Harm reduction interventions need to target young GBM as a priority, and to consider polydrug use and minimising potential harm from drug interactions.

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