



ACT
Government

ACT Health

The Festivals Pill Testing Policy



**A Guide for Event Organisers to
Implement Harm Minimisation**

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The *Festivals Pill Testing Policy* aims to provide guidelines for event organisers to incorporate pill testing and other harm reduction measures into event planning to promote patron health and safety.

Music festivals and other events are popular amongst young adults and provide opportunities for social connection and entertainment. They are an important part of the cultural landscape in Canberra and offer economic benefits to the region.

The ACT Government acknowledges that some patrons at these events will engage in risk taking behaviours which carry the risk of causing significant harms to health, including death. While the ACT Government does not condone these activities, the ACT Government is committed to creating safer environments for event patrons by promoting harm minimisation measures at events in the ACT.

Event organisers can utilise a range of measures, including pill testing, to ensure patrons are aware of the risks associated with particular behaviours to minimise the harms of those behaviours.

The *Festivals Pill Testing Policy* has been developed in consultation with Events ACT, Chief Minister Treasury and Economic Development Directorate, ACT Policing, ACT Ambulance Service and Pill Testing Australia. It aims to guide event organisers to incorporate harm minimisation measures into their event planning and these may include pill testing.

2. Background

2.1 Harm Minimisation

Harm minimisation strategies have been developed to minimise the impact of illness and injury associated with drug and alcohol on individuals. Harm minimisation strategies seek to create safer settings and encourage safer behaviours, and this can have a positive effect on all members of the community. The evidence is clear that harm minimisation programs do not lead to an increase in drug use, in fact research shows such programs can lead to a decrease in drug use¹. Studies have shown that harm minimisation tools, including effective pill testing, have reduced some of the negative outcomes related to taking illicit substances¹.

¹ Groves A. (2018) 'Worth the test?' Pragmatism, pill testing and drug policy in Australia. *Primary Health Care*, 15(12), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12954-018-0216-z>

2.2 Pill Testing

As a harm minimisation tool, pill testing (also known as ‘*drug checking*’) has been shown to be effective in reducing the level of harm associated with drug taking when undertaken as a health model.

It involves engagement with individuals who are considering using a pill or other drug; the individuals can have their pills tested (by scientific medical equipment) to discover what drug or other substance they may really be taking. As part of the process the individuals are provided with a range of information to help them make an informed decision about what they are about to do; understanding the risks better and what to do in the event of any adverse outcome².

One of the most important aspects of pill testing is the possibility of providing a brief harm reduction intervention to the person who is intending to use drugs at the most relevant time³. The importance of this opportunity is recognised almost universally by those involved in pill testing². Users of such services report behavioural changes in relation to their drug use such as taking less of the substance, spacing out their dosing and drinking more water¹.

2.3 Relevant Framework

The development of this policy aligns to the framework provided by the *ACT Drug Strategy Action Plan 2018-2021*⁴ and the *National Drug Strategy 2017-2026*⁵.

2.4 ACT Government Statement on Illicit Drugs

Despite the development of this policy, the ACT Government does not endorse the use of illicit drugs and reiterates that no level of drug use is considered safe. The ACT Government reinforces that it is illegal to manufacture, possess, distribute and sell illicit drugs in the ACT. While there is an exception for people aged 18 and over to possess small amounts of cannabis, it remains illegal to consume cannabis in public. The ACT Government is committed to harm minimisation, in line with the *National Drug Strategy*⁵. The ACT Government considers that pill testing as a component of harm minimisation measures is a sensible approach to limiting the dangers of illicit drug use at ACT events.

2 Brunt T. (2017). *Drug checking as a harm reduction tool for recreational drug users: opportunities and challenges*. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction: Netherlands.

3 Butterfield R.J., Barratt M.J., Ezard N, Day R.O. (2016). Drug checking to improve monitoring of new psychoactive substances in Australia. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 204(4) 144-145, <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja15.01058>

4 ACT Government. (2018) *ACT Drug Strategy Action Plan 2018-2021*. Canberra: ACT Government.

5 Commonwealth of Australia Department of Health. (2017) *National Drug Strategy 2017-2026*. Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.

3. Assumptions

3.1 Existing Policies and Requirements

This policy does not replace or substitute the robust elements of event planning and approval processes that already exist in the ACT. Required adherence to these pre-existing policies remains. These include risk identification and management, liquor licence approval process and requirements to provide free and accessible drinking water.

3.2 Relevance to Events

Many of the recommendations listed in this policy may not be relevant to all events held in the ACT. It is the expectation that responsible event organisers will adopt a prudent approach to event planning and implement the recommendations as appropriate to their event. It is expected that events such as large-scale music festivals and dance parties would be the most likely events to have pill testing, however other events are not excluded.

4. Recommended Safety Measures to be Implemented at Events

4.1 Chill-Out Areas

Event organisers are encouraged to provide 'chill-out areas' situated throughout the event to allow patrons an opportunity to escape the crowd and noise. Chill-out areas should be well ventilated, cool and quiet spaces for patrons to rest and recover. The chill-out areas should provide access to free water and be supervised by event staff with First-Aid training. The chill-out areas should be accessible for emergency services. Event organisers should consider providing mobile phone charging stations within the chill-out areas to support patron safety.

4.2 Peer Support Services

Event organisers are encouraged to incorporate peer support services into their events, separate to any pill testing service. Peer support services at events aim to reduce alcohol and other drug use and/or harms. Peer support organisations attend events and work closely with the First Aid providers to provide a crowd care strategy, first response to adverse events, encourage patrons to stay hydrated, promote sun safety and provide access to condoms, all whilst offering non-judgemental advice related to the risks associated with drug use. Organisations such as *DanceWize*, *Red Frogs* or *Save-a-mate* are volunteer-based organisations that have been active in peer support services for many years and operate at various types of events.

4.3 Event Briefing

Event organisers should offer a briefing session or document to all event staff detailing how and where to access medical assistance at the event. The briefing should include information on how to recognise the signs of alcohol intoxication or possible adverse drug reactions. All event staff should be encouraged to seek immediate assistance if they are concerned about a patron at the event.

4.4 Sun Safety

Event organisers should offer free access to sunscreen for patrons attending the event and allow for the provision of shaded areas for those wishing to avoid the sun.

5. Advice to Event Organisers in Relation to Pill Testing

5.1 Assessment of Events

The *Festivals Pill Testing Policy* encourages event organisers to consider providing pill testing services at their events. All event organisers are encouraged to assess their event for the appropriateness of pill testing services being offered, but pill testing services are not mandated. It is expected that events such as large-scale music festivals and dance parties would be the most likely events to have pill testing, however other events are not excluded. If pill testing is deemed appropriate, the event organiser should then follow best practice procedures as outlined in this policy.

5.2 Engagement of Emergency Services

Event organisers who deem that pill testing would be appropriate at their event must engage with ACT Policing and the ACT Ambulance Service, preferably at least 3 months prior to the event. Event organisers will need to discuss their event, their plans for pill testing and the requirements for appropriate police support services and medical support (not exclusively relying on private providers and their own assessments of appropriate service levels). These services may incur a further cost to be borne by the event organisers.

5.3 Engagement of Pill Testing Providers

Event organisers who deem that pill testing would be appropriate at their event must employ a qualified and reputable organisation to run front of house medically supervised pill testing services, such as those currently offered by *Pill Testing Australia*.

5.4 Fee for Service

The pill testing organisation is required to advise, organise and operate the pill testing service at the event. The cost of these services is to be negotiated between the service operation and the event organisers with the cost to be borne by the event organisers.

5.5 Health Model

The pill testing model that is to be used in the ACT must operate under a 'health model'; ensuring that patrons who are having their pills or other drugs tested are also receiving accurate and current medical advice from medical professionals and trained peer educators about the dangers associated with drug use and advice on what steps to take if they or their friends experience any adverse reaction/s.

5.6 Visibility of Pill Testing Service

The pill testing service must operate in an area out of sight of the general population of people attending the event within a designated medical/first aid area (however, the pill testing service must act as a stand-alone service).

5.7 Advertising of Harm Reduction Measures

Event organisers may wish to advertise the harm reduction measures, including pill testing, that will be occurring at the event during ticket sales. Event patrons may appreciate knowing that pill testing will be offered at the event and understand that the costs associated with offering pill testing may be incorporated into ticket pricing.

6. Advice to Pill Testing Organisations Providing Services at Events

6.1 Health Model

As listed above, the pill testing model that is to be used in the ACT must operate under a 'health model'; ensuring that patrons who are having their pills or other drugs tested are also receiving accurate and current medical advice by medical professionals and trained peer educators about the dangers associated with drug use and advice on what steps to take if they or their friends experience any adverse reaction/s.

6.2 Engagement of Emergency Services

The pill testing provider must engage with ACT Policing and ACT Ambulance Service preferably at least 3 months prior to the event. The pill testing service need to discuss their plans for pill testing and seek approval to operate the service.

6.3 Qualified Staff

The pill testing provider that is employed to provide the service must have technical staff who are appropriately trained in the use of the pill testing equipment and the staff who are delivering advice and brief intervention about drug use must be trained in drug counselling.

6.4 Pill Testing Equipment

The pill testing equipment utilised must be able to reliably identify the major drug present in an unknown tablet or powder and potentially detect adulterants and/or substances that are unknown within an acceptable time period.

6.5 Communication with Medical Staff

The pill testing provider must develop clear protocols for communication with medical and ambulance personnel and maintain regular communication with staff in the medical area and with the event organiser to brief them on the results of pill testing to ensure appropriate responses in the event of an overdose or other adverse event.

6.6 Limitations and Health Advice

The limitations of pill testing must be communicated to all patrons using the pill testing service, including that testing cannot guarantee the identification of all substances in a sample. Regardless of the pill testing result, each patron must be advised that drug taking is inherently unsafe and safe disposal is the best way to avoid risks to health. The pill testing service should ensure all staff are aware of their responsibilities with respect to communication and utilise the same messaging to patrons to ensure the consistency and accuracy of information provided.

6.7 Amnesty Bins

Amnesty bins for safe disposal of pills and other drugs must be provided within the pill testing service. The amnesty bins must be kept safe and secure during the event. The contents of the amnesty bins must be destroyed onsite, such that they cannot be reconstituted, and safely disposed of after the event by the service.

6.8 Data Collection

The pill testing service is encouraged to collect evaluative data, including but not limited to:

- Number of patrons attending the service
- Number of tests and brief interventions delivered
- Number of patrons who discarded their drug at the service
- Chemical content of each sample tested

Evaluative data should be shared with key stakeholders to inform possible future policy development and for operational and safety needs e.g. to inform police and public health of circulating illicit drugs; notably, contaminated drugs, novel psychoactive substances or substances of high purity.

6.9 Inter-Agency Cooperation

To promote the sharing of information and support inter-agency cooperation; should a patron require medical attention from ACT Ambulance or medical staff and choose to surrender their pills or other substances to them, it is recommended that these substances are immediately tested by the on-site pill testing service in order to guide correct treatments and provide further information to event staff.

6.10 Public Liability Insurance

The pill testing provider who is conducting the pill testing service at an event is required to hold appropriate public liability insurance.

7. Conclusion

The ACT Government wishes for the people of Canberra and visitors to the Territory, who attend public events in the ACT, know that their health and safety is the Government's primary concern. Harm minimisation strategies play an important role in helping to reduce risk and harm and make events safer and more enjoyable for all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF COUNTRY

ACT Health acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land, the Ngunnawal people. ACT Health respects their continuing culture and connections to the land and the unique contributions they make to the life of this area. ACT Health also acknowledges and welcomes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who are part of the community we serve.

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