

Media Release

Hon Jacinta Allan MP
Premier



Tuesday, 25 June 2024

PILL TESTING TRIAL TO KEEP PEOPLE SAFE – AND SAVE LIVES

The Allan Labor Government will trial pill testing – also known as drug checking – in Victoria from this summer.

Premier Jacinta Allan and Minister for Mental Health Ingrid Stitt today announced the trial will run for up to 18 months and include mobile and fixed site services.

Pill testing is all about saving lives and changing people’s behaviour by giving them access to the health and safety information they’re asking for – and it’s needed now more than ever.

- Victoria has seen a rise in drug-related emergency department admissions and 46 overdose deaths in 2022 involving novel synthetic drugs.
- Victorian paramedics responded to more drug overdoses at festivals in the first three months of this year than during all last year.
- The global drug market is ramping up the production of illicit deadly synthetic substances with increased potency, like Fentanyl and Nitazenes.

It’s an implementation trial – not a trial for whether the service should exist long-term. It’s about testing different models of delivery for an important health service that eventually will be in place permanently.

The mobile service is set to begin this summer at the start of the festival season and will attend up to 10 music festivals and events throughout the trial period.

A fixed site will also open in mid-2025 – delivered in partnership with a community or tertiary health provider, operating with targeted hours, and located in an inner Melbourne area close to nightlife and transport.

The drug checking technology available at these services will be able to test the make-up of most pills, capsules, powders, crystals, or liquids and identify harmful chemicals that can lead to death.

Trained peer workers and technical experts will be present during testing to provide personalised and confidential health information to help people make better, safer and more informed decisions.

There are already at least 31 drug checking programs currently operating around the world and in Australia, using both fixed-site and event-based models, and the evidence says it works:

- 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 per cent decrease in drug-related hospital admissions to pill testing services.
- In a 2022 study, 86 per cent of consumers in Portugal and 69 per cent in the UK didn’t consume the drug when test results indicated the drug was different than expected.

No one using the service in Victoria will ever be told a drug is safe to consume. They’ll simply be told what’s in the drug and have a conversation with an expert about the consequences and choices they face.

These conversations are the first step to reducing harm. Most clients using pill testing services in the ACT had never previously discussed drug use with a professional. 90 per cent said they would share the information with peers.

Media contact: Lily King 0499 791 387 | lily.king@minstaff.vic.gov.au

Amendments to the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981* will allow the trial to be introduced along with protections for the services, for its staff, and for its clients – so nobody is breaking the law by operating or using the testing service.

The possession and supply of illicit drugs will not be decriminalised outside the service. Police powers outside the drug checking service will remain the same.

Just like in other Australian jurisdictions, Victoria will consult with police and other authorities to establish a fair and feasible arrangement that doesn't deter people from using the service – and will ensure relevant guidelines and policies are clearly communicated before the trial starts.

While the trial seeks to save lives, reduce drug harm, and improve public health at music festivals, it also aims to reduce pressure on frontline services and enhance Victoria's drug surveillance capabilities.

Pill testing offers real-time surveillance – turbocharging our existing surveillance programs and boosting early detection and rapid assessment of new synthetic drugs hitting our streets.

The Department of Health will also work with agencies and major events to develop a *Safer Music Festivals Framework*, helping organisers and providers understand their roles and responsibilities in keeping patrons safe.

The trial is just one of the health-led drug harm initiatives being delivered by the Labor Government, with the state's multi-year \$95 million Statewide Action Plan to reduce opiate drug deaths and harm now underway.

Quotes attributable to Premier Jacinta Allan

"This is about saving lives."

"Soon enough my own kids will be heading off to music festivals and parties with their mates, and like all parents, sometimes I catch myself thinking...what if the worst happens? What if they don't come home?"

"I don't condone drugs, but if a young person gets handed a pill at a festival, they need someone to tell them exactly what it is and exactly what it does, without telling them that it's safe."

Quotes attributable to Minister for Mental Health Ingrid Stitt

"Honest, open, health-focused conversations and advice is how we reduce drug harm and help people make safer, more informed decisions."

"No drug is safe, but if people choose to take them, they deserve to know what's in it and have the experts tell them how to stay safer – and that's what this trial is all about."