

# DRUG CHECKING IS AN IMPORTANT AND USEFUL HARM REDUCTION MEASURE

## HOW DOES DRUG CHECKING WORK IN PRACTICE?

Drug checking services are part of the Swiss 4-pillar-drug-system **to provide early support to at-risk individuals**. Drug-Checking is a harm reduction and prevention intervention aimed at users of psychoactive substances.

It consists of two elements:



a chemical analysis of an illegally obtained psychoactive substance provided by the client



and a one-on-one counseling session

Drug checking is an intervention which is:

- Acceptance-based
- Low threshold
- Anonymous
- Free of charge

The chemical analysis is performed according to validated methods and by specialized laboratories.

Drug checking is not only – some argue not even primarily – about chemically analyzing illegally obtained substances. Much more, it is a way to gain access to a population of drug users often otherwise inaccessible to prevention and harm reduction services. Clients must take part in a counseling session, are informed about the results of the analysis and are given harm reduction advice depending on the substance(s) and dosages detected in the analysis.

Further, if unusual or unexpected substances or unusually high dosages are detected, **warnings are disseminated**. They are published on websites frequented by the target population and shared with the police, hospitals, forensic laboratories, toxicological institutes, and other prevention and harm reduction services.

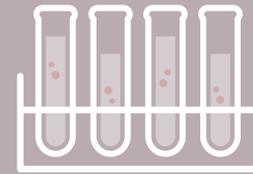
## INITIAL SITUATION

Poly drug use in party settings is common in Switzerland. In order to reach the hard to reach target group of recreational users, first pilot projects started in the mid-nineties with mobile drug checking at parties. It was followed by offers approved by local governments in 1998 in the city of Bern, 2001 in Zurich and 2014 in Basel. 2006, it was followed by the opening of the first stationary drug checking services in Zurich, followed by a similar offer in Bern.



first mobile drug checking at parties

1. 1998 in Bern
2. 2001 in Zurich
3. 2014 in Basel



first walk-in service drug checking

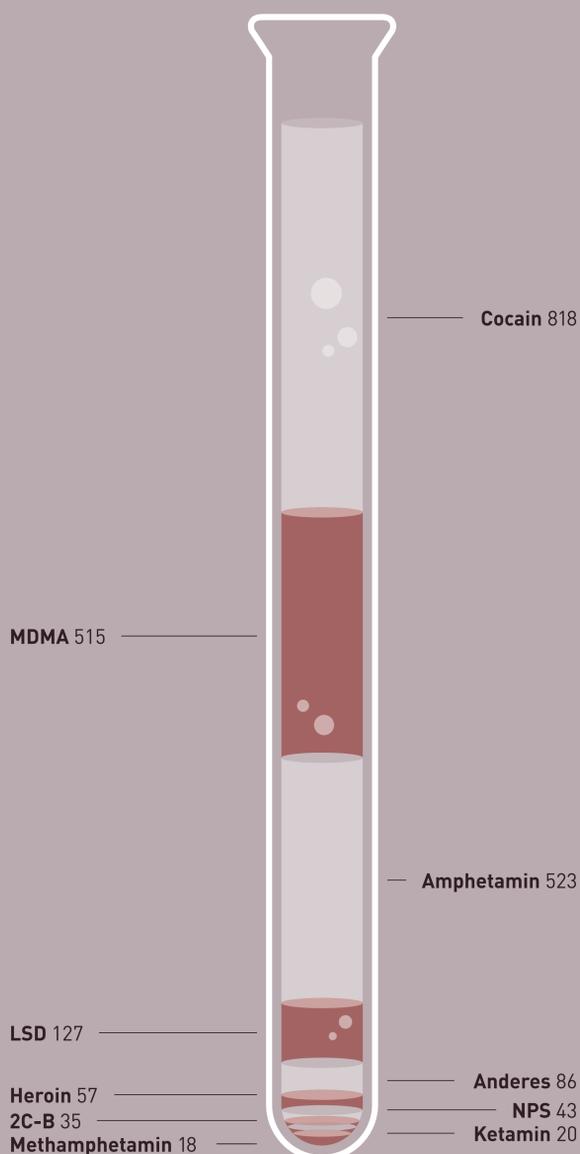
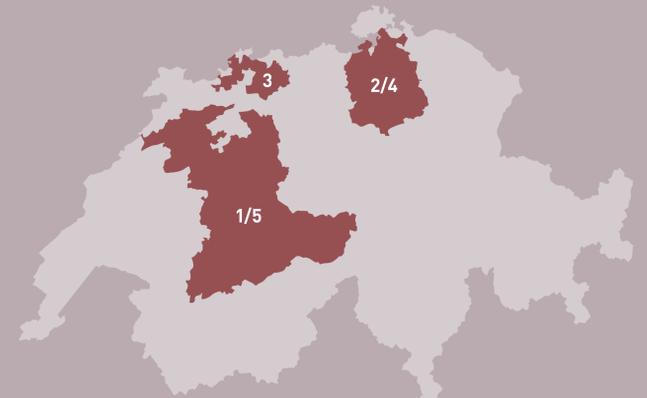
4. 2006 in Zürich
5. 2014 in Bern

## EXAMPLE 2015

Drug checking services in Switzerland analyzed **2242** samples in 2015. **In 1379 cases unexpected substances or unusually high dosages/purity were detected**. This is an increase of 19% compared to the previous year. Overall, the majority of samples tested in 2015 concerned cocaine. However, in mobile testing, MDMA samples prevailed. **Around 150 clients were advised to consider seeking medical or other therapeutic assistance**.



**61%** unexpected substances or unusually high dosages/purity were detected



## OUTCOME

Drug checking is designed to help prevention and harm reduction services access the often hidden population of recreational drug users. Since the beginning, over 13'000 drug analyses have been completed which shows that drug checking is an attractive offer for users of psychoactive substances.

**13'000** drug analyses have been completed

Besides providing access to and engaging recreational drug users, **drug checking contributes to a better understanding of trends in drug markets and drug consumption**. As such, it can serve as an early detection mechanism for dangerous developments on drug markets (e.g. dangerous substances, significant and systematic changes in purity/dosage) especially those difficult to access by other services or the police. In this sense, drug checking also helps to monitor substances and markets. The knowledge about users and markets obtained from sample analyses, counseling sessions and questionnaires can be used to inform the public about potentially health-damaging trends – if warning is deemed appropriate – or **to improve advice to clients on safer use** and other harm reduction measures.

## THE FUTURE OF DRUG CHECKING

As long as most psychoactive substances remain illegal, there will be a need for drug checking. Previously unknown substance will appear on the market; known but rarely used substances can gain popularity; the purity of powders and the dosage in pills will continue to fluctuate as will the use of potentially dangerous adulterants. The reach of drug checking services could and should be extended to other areas in Switzerland as well as to users such as those frequenting drug consumption rooms, cannabis users and users of illegally obtained steroidal androgens, for example.



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[www.infodrog.ch/drug-checking.html](http://www.infodrog.ch/drug-checking.html)