

How many people die from drugs?

The straight answer is that we do not know exactly how many drug-related deaths there are in the UK. This is because:

Drug deaths

There is no one organisation that collects information about drug-related deaths, for all of the UK.

There is no one definition of what we mean by drug-related deaths. For example, it could include:

- people who are dependent on drugs and overdose
- suicides by overdose of people who have no previous history of using drugs
- accidental poisoning or overdose
- ecstasy related deaths where people have died from overheating through dancing non-stop in hot clubs rather than from the direct effect of the drugs
- deaths associated with cigarette smoking
- deaths from accidents where people are drunk or under the influence of drugs
- murders and manslaughters where people are drunk or under the influence of drugs
- deaths from driving while drunk or intoxicated
- deaths from AIDS among injecting drug users
- deaths which had nothing to do with the presence of a drug in the body

Cause of death is recorded on death certificates but doctors may not mention drugs, even where drugs might be involved.

Despite these difficulties there are estimates of the possible number of deaths associated with different drugs:

Tobacco

It is estimated that each year in the UK around 114,000 people die from tobacco-related diseases, particularly from cancer, respiratory diseases and heart disease. [1]

Alcohol

Estimates of annual alcohol-related deaths in England and Wales vary from 5,000 to 40,000. This includes deaths from cirrhosis of the liver and other health problems from long-term drinking, deliberate and accidental overdose, traffic deaths, fatal accidents while drunk etc. [2]

Solvents

A national register of solvent-related deaths recorded 47 deaths associated with volatile substance abuse in 2004. This number shows a small decline from previous years with an average of 61 deaths for the years 1999-2004.[3]

Ecstasy

Deaths associated with different illegal drugs are also difficult to judge accurately. One exception is ecstasy with over 250 ecstasy-related deaths being reported between 1999 and 2004. [4]

AIDS

Deaths from AIDS among injecting drug users who have contracted HIV by sharing injecting equipment are also difficult to judge exactly. However, by December 2004 over 4,200 drug injectors had tested positive for HIV in the UK. Of that total over 1,200 [29%] had been diagnosed with full-blown AIDS and 1545 had died. [5]

Other Drugs

In relation to the whole range of problems which can happen to those who use drugs, death is by far the least likely outcome, but one which, not surprisingly, attracts most attention and causes most concern. Like all data about illegal drug use, information about deaths comes from a variety of sources that combine to present a patchy and incomplete picture. Hence this is a highly simplified overview of what we know about deaths from drug use and how these compare to deaths caused by alcohol and tobacco.

Sources of data

Data is held by The Office of National Statistics (ONS) and the General Register Offices (GRO) for Scotland and Northern Ireland. Data is also collected by the national programme on Substance Abuse Deaths (np-SAD), based within the International Centre for Drug Policy at St George's Hospital, University of London. It was set up initially to track and monitor the deaths of drug addicts who had been notified to the Home Office. St George's Hospital, University of London also collate the annual survey of solvent deaths.

ONS figures for drug related deaths in England and Wales for 1993 was about 860 deaths rising to just over 1,420 in 2004. (In recent years an additional 220-280 drug-related deaths have been reported each year in Scotland). These figures include accidental and deliberate overdose with medicines (excluding paracetamol which is related to roughly 1000 deaths a year. Most of which is suicide). However, the most recent statistics show that deaths involving drugs of misuse have dropped to 1427 in 2004 (from a figure of 1666 in 2000) although the number of deaths involving specific drugs like cocaine and amphetamines (including ecstasy) have risen over the last 10 years.

With many of these deaths people had also been using other drugs and indeed may not have died if they had not been taking more than one drug. [4]

England and Wales

The following represent the ONS data of the total number of deaths from drug use involving the following drugs in England and Wales from 2000 to 2004 which vary as indicated. The figures are based on the International Classification of Diseases, 9th revision - ICD 9 (from 2001, cause of death is coded to ICD-10) - No differentiation is made as to whether the underlying cause of death was drug dependence, accidental poisoning/overdose, related to the drug use or whether one or more drug was implicated - resulting possibly in some double-counting.

Table 1 Drug-related deaths in England and Wales 2000 to 2004[4]

Cocaine	575
Amphetamine	384
Ecstasy	227
Solvents	246[3]
Opiates (heroin, morphine & methadone)	4,976
Alcohol	25,000 - 200,000 approx.
Tobacco	half a million approx (UK - [1])

**Table 2
Number of deaths England and Wales in 2003 and 2004 (substance is mentioned on the death certificate) [4]**

	2003	2004
Cocaine	113	147
All Amphetamines	66	83
Ecstasy	33	48
Solvents	42 [3]	45 [3]
Opiates (heroin, morphine & methadone)	766	944
Cannabis	11	16
All deaths	2445	2598

Scotland

Scotland uses a slightly different coding system based roughly on ICD 10. Data is also collected on people who have died with a known or suspected drug addiction.

**Table 3
Drug-related deaths in Scotland 1998 to 2004 [6]**

Cocaine	137
Amphetamine	N/a
Ecstasy	93
Solvents	51 [3]
Opiates (heroin, morphine & methadone)	1348

[1] ASH (2005) Fact Sheet No.2: Smoking Statistics: illness and death <http://www.ash.org.uk/html/factsheets/html/fact02.html>

[2] Department of Health (2006) Statistical bulletin: statistics on alcohol - England 1978 onwards, HMSO, London. <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/alcoholeng2006>

[3] Field-Smith M.E. et.al. (2006) Trends in death associated with abuse of volatile substances 1971-2004. St George's Hospital Medical School, London. <http://www.sgul.ac.uk/dms/AF55873FC9E502F700521BA40F6B80AA.pdf> (PDF)

[4] ONS, Deaths related to drug poisoning: England and Wales, 1993-2000. *Health Statistic Quarterly*, Spring 2002 http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_health/HSQ13_v4.pdf (PDF) and ONS, Deaths related to drug poisoning: England and Wales, 1999-2003. *Health Statistic Quarterly* 25, Spring 2005. http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_health/HSQ25.pdf (PDF) and ONS, Deaths related to drug poisoning: England and Wales, 2000-2004. *Health Statistic Quarterly* 29, Spring 2006. http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_health/HSQ29.pdf (PDF)

[5] Mapping the Issues.HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections in the United Kingdom: 2005 http://www.hpa.org.uk/publications/2005/hiv_sti_2005/default.htm

[6] GRO Scotland (2005) Drug-Related Deaths in Scotland in 2004. <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/statistics/library/drug-related-deaths/04drug-related-deaths.html>

Also see:

Trends in deaths related to drug misuse in England and Wales, 1993-2004. Morgan O., Griffiths, C., Toson B., Rooney C., Majeed A., Hickman M.

UK. Office for National Statistics.

From: Health Statistics Quarterly: 31, Autumn, 2006, p.23-27.

http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_health/HSQ31.pdf

Inquests into drug-related deaths reported by Coroners in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man & Procurators Fiscal in Scotland

St George's University Hospital, 2007.

This latest report from the National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths (np-SAD).

<http://www.mbland.sghms.ac.uk/dms/7818277BBE9C762E703761A34C6A7E86.pdf>.

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