

Annual UK drug deaths fall by 14 percent, while deaths related to 'legal highs' increase

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(Medical Xpress)—Deaths related to a group of now-banned 'legal highs' rose sharply from 5 in 2009 to 43 in 2010, reveals a report on the latest UK drug death figures released today. While deaths involving methcathinones – which were outlawed in 2010 and include mephedrone – rose, those involving heroin fell significantly. And a decrease in cocaine-related deaths observed over several years continued.

Overall, drug-related deaths in the UK fell by almost 14 per cent from 2,182 in 2009 to 1,883 in 2010, reveals today's National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths (np-SAD) 2011 report. This compares to a rise of 12 per cent in the year before.

The np-SAD outlines drug-related deaths occurring in 2010 that have been formally investigated. It details where a type of drug is involved in a death, either on its own or in combination with another substance, and includes regional breakdowns.

The report contains information reported by coroners in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man, as well as [police forces](#) in Scotland, and the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. It was compiled by the International Centre for Drug Policy (ICDP) at St George's, University of London.

[Heroin](#) and morphine were involved in the most deaths, as in previous years, although there was a fall from 53 per cent to 41 per cent from 2009 to 2010. While the number of heroin and [morphine](#)-related deaths across the UK fell, those involving [methadone](#) rose from 23 per cent to 27 per cent.

Among the stimulant group of drugs, there was a slight decline in deaths from cocaine (from just above nine per cent to just below), but slight increases for [amphetamines](#) (from two per cent to three per cent) and ecstasy-type drugs (0.4 per cent to 0.6 per cent). However, these figures are part of an overall decreasing trend among stimulants over the last few years, which has been partly attributed to a rise in 'legal highs' as well as a decline in the purity of each [stimulant](#) drug.

The report explains how some former [legal highs](#) such as ketamine, piperazines and GHB/GBL have become less popular since 2009, partly as a result of being banned. However, it outlines details of emerging new

drugs such as methcathinones, amphetamine-type substances, and tryptamines. Of these, mephedrone was implicated most often, in 29 deaths in 2010, up from 5 in 2009.

Professor Hamid Ghodse, director of the ICDP at St George's, University of London, said: "The fall in drug-related deaths noted for 2010 is of course welcome. But it should not make us complacent as there are indications that there is still a general upward trend in fatalities involving emerging drugs such as mephedrone and prescription drugs such as methadone. This is a great concern and it is clear that much work is still required in improving access to effective treatment and rehabilitation services, and, most importantly, finding prevention strategies to stop people being at risk in the first place."

The number of deaths related to drugs in England was down to 1,358 from 1,524 in 2009. In Scotland, deaths fell to 365 from 479, in Wales they were down to 81 from 102, and in the islands down to 7 from 12. Deaths in Northern Ireland rose to 72 from 65.

The majority of UK deaths recorded were of males (74 per cent). Most people were between the ages of 25 to 44 (60 per cent), white (96 per cent), and died as a result of an accidental overdose (64 per cent).

During 2010, the Brighton and Hove coroner reported the highest proportion of deaths in the country, with 15 for every 100,000 people aged 16 and over. Although Brighton and Hove continued to have the highest [death](#) rate for the third year in a row, the figure dropped from almost 24 people per 100,000 in 2009.

More information: www.sgul.ac.uk/media/np-SAD%20annual%20report%202011

Provided by St. George's University of London

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