

The Harm Caused by Drugs

Introduction

This information is taken from a BBC television program, Horizon, broadcast on 5 February 2008. It is based on a two year study (led by Prof. David Nutt of Bristol University) on the harm caused by twenty drugs used in the UK today. The number of users is only given where it is known or can be reliably estimated.

The harm caused by the drug was calculated from the following three factors:

- the physical effects of the drug;
- how addictive it is; and
- the social consequences of its use.

The top twenty

Rank	Drug (Class)	Users	Notes
20	Khat	40,000	No recorded deaths
19	Poppers (Alkyl Nitrate)	400,000	No recorded deaths
18	Ecstasy (A)	500,000	27 deaths a year from dehydration
17	GHB (C)	Probably low	Known as the 'date rape' drug, but little evidence of this use; 3 deaths a year
16	Anabolic Steroids (C)	42,000	No deaths, but many physical problems
15	Methyl Phenidate	40,000	No recorded deaths
14	LSD (A)	83,000	No recorded deaths
13	4MTA (A)	Unknown	Recent
12	Solvents	30,000	50-60 deaths each year
11	Cannabis (B)	3,000,000	1 death; possible link with psychosis after long term use
10	Buprenorphine	Unknown	2 deaths
9	Tobacco	10,000,000	114,000 deaths a year – 40% of all hospital deaths; the most addictive drug on this list
8	Amphetamines (B)	430,000	35 deaths; stimulants produce paranoia and depression
7	Benzodiazepine (C)	100,000	Sold as Valium, etc.; 406 deaths

Rank	Drug (Class)	Users	Notes
6	Ketamine (C)	100,000	A horse tranquillizer; 1 death
5	Alcohol	40,000,000	40,000 deaths; 'the biggest public health problem we face'; cost to NHS each year £1.7 Billion
4	Street Methadone	33,000	295 deaths; often diluted, so hard to judge strength; produces less rush than Heroin, so easier to overdose
3	Barbiturates (B)		20 deaths; if you overdose, you are likely to die
2	Cocaine (A)	780,000	214 deaths; almost impossible to use without harm
1	Heroin (A)	300,000	700 deaths; very addictive; very hard to use safely

This ranking is based on the best estimates available. Many drugs are used in combination, and addicts usually suffer from problems other than addiction, so it is hard to tell what produces the harm we see.

If we rank the drugs by the number of deaths per 10,000 users, we get:

Rank	Drug	Users	Deaths	Danger / 10,000	Ratio
11	Cannabis	3,000,000	1	0.003	1
6	Ketamine	100,000	1	0.100	30
18	Ecstasy	500,000	27	0.540	162
8	Amphetamines	430,000	35	0.814	244
2	Cocaine	780,000	214	2.744	823
5	Alcohol	40,000,000	40,000	10.000	3,000
12	Solvents	30,000	55	18.333	5,500
8	Amphetamines	43,000	45	10.465	3,140
1	Heroin	300,000	700	23.333	7,000
7	Benzodiazepine	100,000	406	40.600	12,180
4	Street Methadone	33,000	295	89.394	26,818
9	Tobacco	10,000,000	114,000	114.000	34,200

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