

PMA IMPLICATED IN DRUG DEATHS

At least five users in the north-west of England have died after ingesting PMA – sold as ecstasy pills.

By Mike Power

In April, Rachel Clayton, 34, and 30-year-old Emma Speed were found dead at a house on Crompton Road, Levenshulme. Toxicology results showed the pair had PMA in their systems. PMA was also found in the body of a 34-year-old man who was found dead in a caravan on Batemill Close, Macclesfield in February. Charlotte Woodiwiss, 20, of Chapel-le-Frith, and Dale Yates, 18, from Buxton, died in late December 2012. Toxicology reports showed that the pair, who did not know each other and who took different pills, confirmed the deaths were caused by toxic amounts of PMA.

Nineteen arrests have been made in relation to the latter two cases but no PMA-containing pills have been found, Derbyshire police said.

These deaths were part of a localised wave of fatalities in the north-west. Gareth Ashton, 28, from Wigan, and Jordan Chambers of Poolstock, near Oldham, died in late January, with PMA suspected and police issuing an alert, but not yet confirmed. In February, Travis Barber, 19 and from Manchester, also died after taking half a pink, heart-shaped pill, and though it was uncertain at the time of reporting if this caused his death, police in Greater Manchester issued a warning that PMA was circulating.

This spike in death numbers in such a small area is statistically significant. Between 2006 and 2010 in the UK, MDMA featured, in conjunction with other drugs, on an average of 35 death certificates a year, according to the Office of National Statistics.

The average number of annual deaths in which MDMA was the only substance



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present over the same period is 18 – nationwide.

Ecstasy pills commonly contain a mix of substances, with MDMA the desired chemical by most users, with its euphoric and sociable effects and relatively safe toxicology profile. Around 25 million pills are estimated to be used in the UK each year in a user base of around half a million.

MORE THAN ONE OR TWO PILLS AND IT GETS DANGEROUS, FAST

There are many synthetic routes used in the manufacture of MDMA, most utilising the banned precursors paramethylketone, safrole or isosafrole, with the chemistry carried out in the Netherlands and Belgium.

PMA is made from an entirely different starting material: anethole,

a cheaper, legal chemical. Its presence in Ecstasy pills is not an accident of inexpert chemistry; rather, it is a deliberate passing-off of one chemical as another.

PMA has a steep dose-response curve, with 100mg of the drug affecting users more than twice as hard as 50mg. Its onset is slow and mild and can lead users to think they have been sold inferior tablets, prompting them to take more. At 50mg PMA causes mild euphoria. At slightly higher doses its effects increase rapidly, with heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature all soaring, with the risk of convulsions, coma and even death.

When mixed in pills with MDMA, it can become even more dangerous since PMA can potentiate the serotonin-producing effects of MDMA and can lead to serotonin syndrome and death by overheating.

Johnboy Davidson, administrator of pillreports.com, a website that issued several PMA warnings ahead of the British police's alerts, said: "PMA, when combined with low doses of MDMA, gives [dealers] a lot more bang for their buck. More than one or two pills and it gets dangerous, fast."

Newspaper reports have cut-and-pasted inaccurate information from the Wikipedia page on PMA, saying the drug is "known as" Mitsubishi Turbos, Pink Ecstasy, Dr Death, Pink McDonald's, Double Stacked, Chicken Yellow and Chicken Fever. In fact, PMA in the UK is never sold by any brand names and is instead an adulterant in ecstasy pills, sold in many different colours, sizes shapes and logos.