European Monitoring Centre
for Drugs and Drug Addiction

emcdda.europa.eu

25 YEARS EU EARLY WARNING SYSTEM
ON NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES
1997–2022

25 years of monitoring and responding to new drugs in Europe

In 2022, the EU Early Warning System (EWS) on new psychoactive substances (NPS) celebrates its 25th anniversary. Operated by the EU drugs agency (EMCDDA) in close cooperation with Europol and other partners, it was the first regional early warning mechanism set up to monitor and respond to uncontrolled new drugs. The system ensures that the EU and its Member States have up-to-the-minute information on NPS and the threats they pose to Europe, in order to protect public health and inform decision-making.

The globalisation of drug markets has led to an increase in the number, type and availability of new drugs. In 2021, 52 NPS were reported for the first time in Europe through the system, bringing the total number monitored by the EMCDDA to 880. NPS are often sold as 'legal' replacements for controlled drugs and aim to mimic the effects of substances such as heroin, cannabis, cocaine and 'ecstasy'.

Over the last 25 years, the new drugs market has undergone significant change, with novel, potent and toxic substances putting consumers at greater risk. The EMCDDA has responded by assessing the risks posed by 37 NPS. In the past five years alone, the EWS has identified serious harms linked to 17 of them, which has led to controls at EU level.

The EMCDDA has developed new methods to strengthen how the EWS detects, assesses and responds to cross-border threats. These include a toxicovigilance system (reporting acute poisonings and deaths), structured monitoring of open source information, signal management and a targeted risk communication system.

Definition of NPS

A new psychoactive substance is a new narcotic or psychotropic drug that is not controlled by the United Nations drug conventions. NPS may pose public health threats comparable to those caused by controlled substances.

Legislation tackling NPS

Regulation (EC) No 1920/2006 (as amended by Regulation (EU) 2017/2101)

Council Framework Decision 2004/757/JHA (as amended by Directive (EU) 2017/2103)

This legislation strengthens EU and Member States' responses to NPS through a three-step approach:

1. Information exchange and early warning
2. Risk assessment
3. Decision-making on control measures

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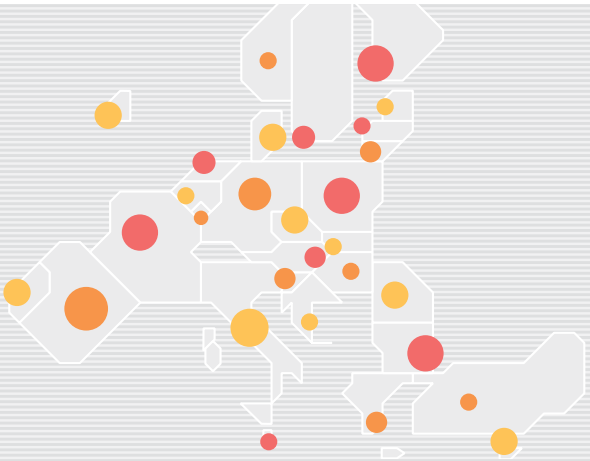


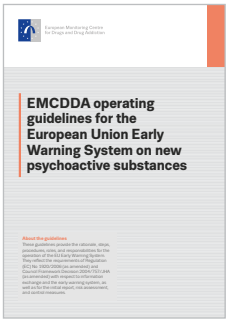
EARLY WARNING | **RISK ASSESSMENT** | **CONTROL**

Early Warning System network

The EWS is designed to allow the European Union to rapidly detect, assess and respond to health and social threats caused by NPS (see opposite). In operation since 1997, it helps build, maintain and strengthen situational awareness, preparedness and responses to NPS at national and EU level. The system relies on a multidisciplinary network composed of the EMCDDA, 29 national early warning systems (27 EU, Turkey and Norway), Europol and its law-enforcement networks, the European Medicines Agency, the European Commission, the European Chemicals Agency, the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the European Food Safety Authority. Underpinning each of the national early warning systems is the exchange of information on the chemical identification of NPS from forensic and toxicology laboratories.

EMCDDA publications on NPS

Over 100 publications on the topic of NPS are available on the EMCDDA website. These include a 2022 report reflecting on the achievements of the EWS over a quarter of a century and on Europe's NPS situation: past, present and future. Also available are EWS operating guidelines providing the rationale, procedures and responsibilities for the operation of the system.



Information exchange and early warning

When a new psychoactive substance is detected for the first time in an EU Member State, the EMCDDA notifies the EWS network on behalf of the country concerned. The agency then starts monitoring it, while Member States report relevant information on the substance to the EMCDDA and Europol (via the Reitox national focal points and Europol national units). Response actions by the EMCDDA may include intensive monitoring of the substance, risk communications and the production of an 'initial report' submitted to the European Commission and the Member States. On the basis of this report, which provides scientific evidence, the Commission decides whether or not to request a formal risk assessment.

Risk assessment

The formal risk assessment is carried out by the EMCDDA's Scientific Committee, extended to additional experts from the EU Member States, the European Commission and the European Medicines Agency. The resulting risk assessment report is submitted to the Commission and the Member States for consideration and supports decision-making on NPS controls at EU level.

Decision-making on control measures

Based on the risk assessment report, the European Commission may decide to submit the new substance to control measures — the third and final step of the EU response to NPS. For this, the Commission adopts a delegated act amending the Annex of the Council Framework Decision 2004/757/JHA and adding the new psychoactive substance to it. The Council of the EU and the European Parliament have two months to decide whether they agree. Member States' authorities have six months to place the substance under control, at national level, once the decision enters into force.