



News release

from the EU drugs agency in Lisbon

EU EARLY WARNING SYSTEM ON NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES

25 years of monitoring and responding to new drugs in Europe

(14.06.2022, LISBON) This year, the **EU Early Warning System (EWS)** on new psychoactive substances (**NPS**) celebrates its 25th anniversary. Operated by the **EMCDDA**, in close cooperation with **Europol** and partners ⁽¹⁾, it was the first regional early-warning mechanism set up to monitor and respond to uncontrolled new drugs. In a new report published today, the **EMCDDA** reflects on the achievements of the system over a quarter of a century and on Europe's NPS situation: past, present and future.

The publication — ***New psychoactive substances: 25 years of early warning and response in Europe. An update from the EU Early Warning System*** — is released to mark the anniversary this week ⁽²⁾. In three parts, it presents the history and development of the system (see [timeline](#)), an update of work in 2020–21 and lessons learned to help meet future challenges.

The globalisation of drug markets and technological developments have led to an increase in the number, type, availability and harms caused by NPS. These factors have also helped to create a more resilient and highly dynamic market that is more challenging to disrupt. Today's report highlights the latest NPS trends and emerging threats in order to support early warning, preparedness and response measures. Included in the review are updates on the main NPS groups ([synthetic cathinones](#), [synthetic cannabinoids](#), [opioids](#), [benzodiazepines](#)), each enriched by infographics and case studies.

Critical information on NPS from across Europe is shared through the EWS, on the premise that 'good decisions begin with good data'. 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, as they mimic the effects of substances such as heroin, cannabis, cocaine and 'ecstasy'.

EMCDDA Director Alexis Goosdeel says: 'Over the last 25 years, the new drugs market has undergone significant change, with more potent and toxic substances putting consumers at greater risk. The 25th anniversary of the EU Early Warning System provides an opportunity to reflect on these changes and build on lessons learned. This will help inform the direction of our future work, protect public health and ensure that the EU remains at the forefront of the response to NPS and drugs in general. This is increasingly important at a time when we are facing a more complex drug situation, characterised by high availability'.

Over the years, the **EMCDDA** has developed a number of 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 and a targeted risk communication system. In 2021, the **EMCDDA** issued seven public health alerts to the network based on EU-relevant threats. These included advisories on the spread of low-THC cannabis adulterated with synthetic cannabinoids and the detection of fake opioid analgesic medicines containing highly potent opioids. A chapter dedicated to NPS appears in the ***European Drug Report 2022*** also published today ⁽³⁾.

⁽¹⁾ The system relies on a multidisciplinary network composed of the EMCDDA, 29 national early-warning systems (27 EU, TR and NO), Europol and its law-enforcement networks, the European Medicines Agency, the European Commission and other partners.

https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/publications/topic-overviews/eu-early-warning-system_en

⁽²⁾ 16 June marks 25 years since legislation was adopted in the EU allowing it to rapidly react to threats caused by NPS (Joint Action, 1997).

⁽³⁾ European Drug Report 2022 (25 languages) — https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/edr2022_en