

What did Australia's first fixed-site drug checking service CanTEST find in its first two years

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CanTEST has checked over 3,000 drug samples since its launch in July 2022. *(ABC News: Greg Nelson)*

In short:

In its first two years, Canberra's fixed drug checking service, CanTEST, issued 20 community notices regarding unexpected substances and identified four previously undetected substances.

Bronwyn Hendry, CEO of Directions Health Services which operates CanTEST, says drug checking and the provision of harm reduction information saves lives.

What's next?

The ACT government will continue funding CanTEST until June 2027.

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Australia's first fixed-site drug checking service found meth in a counterfeit diet pill and a synthetic opioid thought to be 25 times stronger than fentanyl in its first two years of operation.

CanTEST is a free and confidential service that allows people to check what substances are in illicit drugs.

The service's two-year report said it had seen an increase in the mean purity of the more than 3,000 samples presented to the service since its launch in July 2022.

Malcolm McLeod of the Australian National University's Research School of Chemistry said that research may reflect changes to the ACT drug market, and also further afield.

Mean drug purity

	First year	Second year
Cocaine	23%	76%
Heroin	44%	72%
Ketamine	68%	79%
MDMA	58%	69%
Meth	72%	77%

"The data shows noteworthy changes in the samples presented to the service over the past two years, including an increase in the median purity of cocaine and heroin,"

Professor McLeod said.

It found [N-pyrrolidino protonitazene \(NPP\), a synthetic opioid believed to be 25 times stronger than fentanyl, in a brown granular powder presented for testing,](#) and [methamphetamine as the only active ingredient in a diet pill expected to contain the appetite suppressant phentermine.](#)

The service has issued 20 community notices about unexpected or concerning substances, including three detections of nitazenes, which are extremely potent synthetic opioids that carry a high risk of overdose.

CanTEST also identified four novel substances that were previously undetected, [including one similar to ketamine which was dubbed "CanKet"](#).

None of them were what their owners believed them to be.

Canberra fixed-site drug checking service CanTEST issued 20 community notices about unexpected or concerning substances in its first two years of operation. *(Supplied: CanTEST)*

Of the 1,153 samples tested in the first year of operations 136, or 12 per cent, were voluntarily discarded by the person who bought them after receiving the testing results.

In the second year, 170 of 1,786 samples, or 10 per cent, were voluntarily discarded.

Best outcome 'is that nobody gets hurt'

Dr David Caldicott says he wants people who take drugs to do so as safely as possible. *(ABC News: Donal Sheil)*

CanTEST is operated by Directions Health Services (DHS) in partnership with Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA) and Pill Testing Australia.

Clinical lead David Caldicott said he would not want his young daughter to ever use drugs.

But he realised some people would take drugs and he wanted them to do so as safely as possible.

"For her, my ideal outcome is that she shouldn't use any drugs," Dr Caldicott told ABC Radio Canberra.

"I know that's an unrealistic outcome — there's going to be a group of people who choose to use drugs.

"So for me, my best outcome for people who use drugs is that nobody gets hurt and that their period of drug use — of experimentation — is as short as possible, and as least harmful as possible.

"And, that they go on to be productive members of society and spend their ill-gotten gains on something else."

The service operates in Canberra's CBD and offers drug testing for free, but it also offers free health, alcohol and other drug (AOD) support services regardless of whether a client has a substance they want tested.

CanTEST provided 4,041 health and AOD brief interventions in the first two years of operations, and also provided 225 nasal naloxone sprays, which can reverse the effects of an opioid overdose, to clients for free in that time.

The service said it wasn't just the people who brought in substances to be checked it was helping, with the harm reduction information provided on its social media accounts having an overall reach of 269,286.

Global implications

Dr Caldicott said CanTEST had been able to detect unexpected trends in drug use, some of which had global implications.

This had included an unanticipated increase in the use Ketamine-like substances among younger people.

"This allows us to not only provide information to the local community but to the global community," he said.

"We've discovered drugs that have never been seen anywhere else in the world before as a consequence of the involvement of our amazing chemistry team from ANU and that information can be shared globally.

"We may be able to influence and stop trends right at the very beginning."

'Altered the trajectory of thousands of young people'

Dr Caldicott said CanTEST was a "natural extension" from the festival-based services first provided in Canberra.

"Service users were offered the opportunity to access the same sort of service outside of the music festival calendar, and have embraced it wholeheartedly," Dr Caldicott said.

"It has altered the trajectory of thousands of young people who use drugs and paved the way for other jurisdictions to take the plunge."

Directions Health Services CEO Bronwyn Hendry says drug checking and the provision of harm reduction information saves lives. *(ABC News: Tahlia Roy)*

DHS chief executive Bronwyn Hendry said the service was very proud to have prompted the establishment of other drug checking initiatives in Australia.

"[That includes] festival-based and fixed-site drug checking in Queensland and a small drug checking research project in the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC) in Sydney, as well as the recently announced funding for drug checking in Victoria," she said.

"Drug checking and the provision of harm reduction information saves lives, so increased access to services can only benefit the community."

ACT Population Health Minister Emma Davidson says CanTEST has helped people make more informed decisions about taking drugs. *(ABC News: Antoinette Radford)*

ACT Minister for Population Health Emma Davidson said CanTEST had reduced drug-related harm and helped many Canberrans during its first two years of operation

"They have helped people make more informed decisions and have honest, open conversations with health professionals about their needs," she said.

"The ACT government is committed to minimising drug harm and thanks Directions Health Services, Pill Testing Australia, and the Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy for all their hard work to support our community."

The ACT government has announced it will extend CanTEST's funding until June 2027.