

In a glimpse

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Chemsex, a look back at 15 years of drug use in a sexual context

After documenting the emergence and evolution of chemsex practices, the French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT) is publishing a briefing note updating our insights into these practices and based on data collected by its territorialised observation collection scheme, TREND. This note presents an overview and traces the main developments in the chemsex phenomenon over the past fifteen years.

Increased mobilisation of field actors and public authorities

Although the spread of chemsex remains difficult to quantify precisely, this practice, mingling sexual practices and drug use, concerns 13 to 14% of men who have had sex with other men (MSM) in the last year. In fifteen years, it has clearly gained visibility, both in the media and among hospital staff, addiction and sexual health professionals. Since 2010, the latter have reported an emergence of health problems (poisoning and overdoses, addiction, venous damage, psychological disorders, liver infections, etc.) among some chemsexers. This is explained by the fact that chemsex combines the risks associated with drug use and risky sexual behaviour. As a result, the response to the issues raised by chemsex practices has increased mobilisation of field actors and public authorities.

With this briefing, the OFDT updates the information on chemsex and offers a global analysis combining the experience of users, socio-health actors and public authorities questioned on different aspects of the phenomenon: profiles of participants, consumption of substances (products, practices, contexts), supply and methods of supply, health consequences and public responses. Thus, it allows not only to take stock of the phenomenon, but also to follow its evolution over the last fifteen years.

Changes in use contexts

While the first information collected by the OFDT TREND scheme in the early 2000s was based on observations in party environments open to the MSM public, from 2010 onwards, attendance at party establishments declined in favour of home parties. They take on very varied forms and organisational methods – reflecting the great diversity of socio-demographic profiles of chemsexers, as well as their consumption trajectories and their levels of knowledge of the risks.

Consumption focused on cathinones, GBL and more recently ketamine

Consumption of psychoactive substances remains largely centred on cathinones and GBL, but ketamine, little observed until 2010 and reserved for certain sexual practices, is now increasingly present. The difficulty of supplying 3-MMC (a molecule classified as a narcotic in the Netherlands in 2021) has led to a shift towards other substances, mainly other cathinones but also ketamine, which is frequently used in injection.

Although the injection of substances, which chemsex practitioners call “slam”, emerged in the late 2000s, it remained little observed and rejected for almost a decade. It is now reported by all sources in the TREND scheme, making the development of slam among a fraction of chemsexers one of the major developments since the late 2010s.