

Budd, a harm-reducing app for chemsex

The app called Budd will be tested by ITM researchers. The app aims to help participants to be more aware of the risks related to chemsex.

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Dit is de omschrijving

Chemsex, or sex parties when participants use synthetic drugs, have been gaining in popularity for a few years. The Institute of Tropical Medicine (ITM) in Antwerp, in collaboration with the University of Antwerp and the Flemish centre of expertise for alcohol and other drugs (VAD) has developed a harm-reducing app for people who take part in chemsex parties. The app called Budd, helps participants to be more aware with respect to chemsex. It is a method for encouraging those who take part in chemsex parties to do so in a safer way. From this month, researchers from ITM will test the app in a pilot project, among a limited group. On the basis of the findings in this testing phase, the app will be improved and then rolled-out further.

Budd is a personal, digital buddy which guides and supports people who take part in chemsex, both during and after parties. Participants maintain a summary of their planned parties in the app and receive tips about limiting risk in advance of the events. These tips can be converted by participants into personal goals, e.g. with respect to drug use, sexual health, help from others, and so on. A few days after the party, the app checks whether the person concerned applied the tips. This makes people more aware of their own behaviour so there is a greater chance that they will maintain control on usage. Users can also track their moods using the app. They are asked to score their mood just before they go to a party, after the event and two days later. In addition, Budd also provides information on chemsex-related topics, a tool for checking to ensure drug combinations are safe, a summary of the Flemish support services available, and a description of the most common emergency situations. During the party, participants can easily contact support services and an individual confidant via the app.

In the pilot project, a small group will test the app thoroughly. The researchers will also set up an online questionnaire for potential Budd users. On the basis of this questionnaire, the researchers will gauge the extent to which users are prepared to use the app in the future and/or whether it has offered genuine added value for them. This enables them to make the app as effective as possible.

“Chemsex is a growing phenomenon, primarily in big cities such as London, Berlin, Amsterdam and Brussels. During these parties, the participants use drugs which are likely to blur boundaries and allow them to take greater risks than usual. With this app, we hope to ensure that people who go to chemsex parties are more aware of the risks for themselves but also for others”, explains Corinne Herrijgers, researcher at ITM.

The road to help is not always clear for those who take part in chemsex. “Last year, we held in-depth interviews with the target group to gain further insights into their needs and how they currently deal with the risks that correspond with chemsex. These conversations taught us that people who partake in chemsex are often unaware of the organisations they can turn to for chemsex-related support or advice. The barriers to support may seem insurmountable, particularly as they fear that service providers may judge them for their participation in chemsex. Moreover, people often don't know where to access reliable information and how to source the appropriate assistance when it is required. With the findings from this research, we have developed the harm-reducing app, Budd, a low-threshold and anonymous tool for people who engage in chemsex, with the appropriate, reliable information they need. Although the mobile app is designed to offer support to this target group, it is no replacement for support by professionals. There is a serious need for a clear provision of support which allows anyone with sex or drug-related questions to seek anonymous support from professionals”, stressed Tom Platteau, sexologist at ITM.

Clinical experience has shown that people who take part in chemsex often also struggle with feelings of loneliness. These people feel the need to talk openly about the issue and their participation in chemsex, but are inhibited by social taboos. They therefore feel as if they cannot discuss it with friends or

family members and also feel uncomfortable talking to support workers. This dynamic can lead to and reinforce a sense of loneliness. Additional research is required to carry out a more in-depth analysis of chemsex in order to offer more effective help.

What is chemsex?

Sex and drugs have been an exciting cocktail for many years. Most users succeed in limiting this to an acceptable level. Over the past ten years, however, new and much stronger substances have come onto the market; these are also much harder to use in a controlled manner. This may involve parties that carry on for days, where different drugs are combined and which require participants to recuperate for several days thereafter. These repercussions, combined with various other factors (impact on professional activities, financial issues, social isolation) may lead to some individuals suffering as a result of their chemsex participation.

Are you interested in this app?

With [this questionnaire](#), the researchers want to gauge the effectiveness and user-friendliness of the app among potential users.