



Centre
for Addiction and
Mental Health
Centre de
toxicomanie et
de santé mentale

Information Bulletin

Ecstasy

The purpose of this information sheet is to provide the public and health care professionals with accurate information about Ecstasy and its use.

What is Ecstasy?

Ecstasy is a psychoactive drug with hallucinogenic and amphetamine-like effects. Its short form chemical name is MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine). Among some other names Ecstasy goes by are E, XTC, Adam and Mitsubishi.

Often called a “designer drug”, Ecstasy is produced through chemical synthesis mostly in illicit laboratories. It currently has no approved medical use. Ecstasy is usually sold in tablet or gelatin capsule form, and taken orally in doses of 50 to 200 mg. It may also be sold in powder form, or the tablets may be crushed and then snorted. The drug comes in different shapes, sizes, and colours depending on who is making it. The cost of the drug varies, but \$25 per tablet is common. Ecstasy produces effects that usually begin within one hour, and may last for four to six hours.

Mixing other drugs with Ecstasy – such as LSD and GHB amongst others – has also been known to occur. Though the user usually does this knowingly, because Ecstasy tablets may contain other substances the user may in fact be mixing drugs unknowingly.

The History of Ecstasy

MDMA was first produced in 1914 by pharmaceutical researchers as an experimental compound. In the 1970s a small number of psychotherapists in the United States began to use MDMA as a supplement to psychotherapy for its supposed ability to increase insight and empathy during sessions. In the 1980s the drug gained popularity as a recreational drug.

Since the late 1980s or early 1990s Ecstasy’s use has been associated with young people who attend “raves”. The first rave was held in the Netherlands in 1987, later gained popularity in England, and then in North America. Raves are often held in warehouses and other large venues or outdoor locations that can hold large numbers of people. With its distinctive “house” or “techno” music and all night dancing, raves have since come to be a mainstream form of entertainment for teenagers and young adults in Canada and the U.S.

Recently, Ecstasy has also gained popularity with urban professionals.

Ecstasy is listed as a controlled substance under Section 3 of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act in Canada, and is prohibited for sale in this country. The drug is a Schedule I Controlled Substance in the U.S. making it illegal to possess with the intent to manufacture, distribute or dispense.

What are the effects?

In low to moderate doses Ecstasy can produce a mild intoxication, a strong sense of pleasure and feelings of euphoria. There is often an increased sense of sociability or closeness with others, and enhanced communication skills. Like all stimulant drugs, Ecstasy may make users feel full of energy and confidence. However, Ecstasy users may experience an increase in sweating, increased blood pressure and heart rate, nausea, grinding of the teeth and jaw pain, anxiety or panic attacks, blurred vision, and vomiting.

There is also the potential for strong negative effects and psychiatric complications that may last for days or weeks. These include confusion, panic, insomnia, paranoia, or even convulsions. There is extensive evidence in animals that recreational doses of Ecstasy can cause permanent nerve damage. Recent research confirms these findings in humans.

Higher doses of Ecstasy may intensify the negative effects described above and may produce a distortion in perception, thinking or memory. It also may produce psychosis, paranoia, hallucinations, and long lasting bouts of anxiety or depression.

Some users have reported weight loss, confusion, irritability, depression, paranoia, psychosis and exhaustion. Reactions may be severe and unpredictable. Jaundice and liver damage have been reported. Long term use of Ecstasy has not been thoroughly documented.

Ecstasy can interfere with the body's ability to regulate temperature. There have been several fatal incidents associated with Ecstasy use. Deaths have occurred from kidney or cardiovascular failure induced by a very high body temperature and dehydration. Young people attending all night raves sometimes over-exert themselves while dancing. Combine this with the heat, heavier sweating, and failure to drink enough fluids, and there is substantial increased risk of harm associated with the drug's use. However, depending on an individual's fluid status, drinking too much water may lead to "fluid overload" which may be fatal.

Individuals who use Ecstasy at raves or other party atmospheres are often advised to wear loose, thin clothing, take breaks from dancing, and drink plenty of water or other non-alcoholic beverages. As with all illegal street drugs, the purity and strength of Ecstasy can never be accurately gauged. In other words, the user can never be sure of exactly what drug and how much they are taking.

Until recently, Ecstasy has had the reputation by its users for being a relatively problem free and "safe drug". Scientific evidence now shows otherwise. The question of how much or how often ecstasy needs to be ingested before the user develops problems or has a serious adverse effect is not known. Those who seem to be more at risk of developing problems are those who: use a large amount at one time, use it on a frequent basis, have an underlying or undiagnosed psychiatric problem, and are also using other illicit drugs such as cocaine and LSD.

Herbal Ecstasy

Herbal Ecstasy – the name is deliberately misspelled – has gained popularity recently among ravers as a “safer” alternative to Ecstasy. It is reported to have more amphetamine-like qualities – including increased alertness and heart rate – without the openness, empathy and other emotional highs associated with Ecstasy.

Some proponents of Herbal Ecstasy claim that the product is all natural and contains no chemicals. However, Herbal Ecstasy contains caffeine and an ephedra herb known as Ma Huang, which contains ephedrine. The combination of caffeine and the ephedra herb in certain weight-loss products has caused heart attacks and a number of deaths.

Ephedrine is a central nervous system stimulant that some athletes use to enhance performance. Potential adverse effects associated with the abuse of ephedrine includes headache, dizziness, insomnia, irritability, hypertension, and having a stroke.

Student Use of Ecstasy

In the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health’s 1999 Ontario Student Drug Use Survey, 4.4 per cent of students said they had ever used Ecstasy in the past year. That is an increase from 1.8 per cent in 1995. In the 1999 study, no gender differences were found regarding the prevalence of Ecstasy use, and 11th and 13th graders were more likely to report Ecstasy use.

For more information on mental health or addiction issues, please call the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health at 1-800-463-6273, or in Toronto at (416) 595-6111 or check our website at www.camh.net.

