

GHB

GHB (gammahydroxybutyrate), also known as G, GBH, and liquid ecstasy, and is a popular drug on the club scene, giving users an alcohol-like high with powerful sexual effects. It is also used by body-builders to help stimulate muscle growth. It was recently made a "class C" drug in the UK meaning that dealing and possession of the drug is illegal. There has been a well-publicised crack-down on its use on the club scene in recent months after several cases of overdose and death were reported.

Legal status

For many years sex shops used to openly sell GHB. However in 2003 the law changed. It is now illegal to possess or sell GHB. Possession can carry a prison sentence of up to two years, and a conviction for dealing GHB can mean up to 14 years in prison.

GBL (gamma butyrolactone) is often taken as a substitute for GHB as it is not illegal, and is converted by the body into GHB.

Appearance

GHB is a colourless liquid with a faint chemical smell and a salty taste. The drug is usually sold in brown plastic bottles, and people often use the cap to 'measure' a dose.

Effects

GHB affects the release of dopamine in the brain, and at low doses causes relaxation or sleep. Higher doses can lower blood pressure and can cause breathing difficulties. Overdose can cause unconsciousness and coma. People with asthma, breathing problems, epilepsy or low blood pressure are particularly likely to experience a bad reaction if they take the drug.

The drug normally starts to have an effect after about half an hour. People report feeling feel uninhibited, exhilarated, and relaxed. The effects normally last an hour or two but can last up to 24 hours.

It is difficult to say what a safe dose of GHB is, as concentrations of the liquid vary. Therefore, it is easy to overdose on GHB. Often this is because people take a larger dose than they think they are taking, or they take a repeat dose because they do not think the first dose has worked.

Symptoms of overdose can involve disorientation, dizziness, slurred speech, vomiting, breathing problems, fits, stupor and coma. Many people have been hospitalised after taking GHB and some people have died, often because they developed breathing problems or choked on their own vomit.

Interaction with anti-HIV drugs

Levels of GHB can be increased to a life-threatening extent if taken with protease inhibitors according to a case report of a man who became unconscious after taking a teaspoon full of GHB whilst taking an anti-HIV combination including ritonavir and saquinavir. He had also taken two ecstasy tablets the day before along with another teaspoon of GHB. The man had reported no bad reaction to either GHB or ecstasy before starting protease inhibitors. Doctors think that the ritonavir and saquinavir slowed down the metabolism of ecstasy and GHB causing the near fatal reaction.

It makes good sense to be very careful if you are taking ANY protease inhibitor and are thinking of taking GHB.

Interaction with alcohol and other recreational drugs

GHB should NEVER be taken at the same time, or within a few hours of alcohol as this can increase the chance of becoming unconscious or falling into a coma. GHB can also make the effects of other recreational drugs, such as ecstasy and Ketamine unpredictable.

Other issues

Think about how your use of GHB may impact on your wider health, including your adherence to your anti-HIV medication or the kind of sex you have.

If you are concerned about your use of GHB or any other drug, then talk to a member of your healthcare team.

NAM reminds its readers that the use of GHB is illegal in the UK. This factsheet has been written with UK law in mind. The legal status of GHB may be different in other countries.

please photocopy and pass on

copyright © NAM 2006
all rights reserved

**NAM publishes a
wide range of
publications on
treatment for HIV**

**for details write to
NAM
Freepost LON 17995
London SW9 6BR**

tel
+44 (0) 207840 0050
web
www.aidsmap.com