

# GHB

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GHB (gammahydroxybutyrate), also known as G, GBH, and liquid ecstasy, 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 is a 'Class C' drug in the UK meaning that dealing and possession of the drug is illegal.

## Legal status

For many years sex shops sold GHB openly. 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 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

GHB can interact with some anti-HIV drugs. Levels of GHB can be increased to a life-threatening extent if taken with protease inhibitors.

## 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 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 who should be able to direct you to support.

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.