

Center for Behavioral Health Studies



Ecstasy—A Drug With Complex Consequences

Ecstasy's Growing Abuse

Ecstasy is one drug that has continued to soar in popularity, at a time when the abuse of many illicit drugs has leveled off or declined slightly among the nation's youth.

Known by many names, among them MDMA, Ecstasy, X, or simply E, it is the only drug whose use has increased significantly among the nation's 10th and 12th graders during the last 2 years.

By 2002, its reach extended to younger adolescents with use increasing among eighth-graders. **Recent data suggests that Ecstasy abuse also is spreading well beyond its base of youthful users** who attend dance clubs or all night parties called raves. Increasingly, Americans of all ages, social classes, and sexual orientations are now using this drug in diverse social settings.



National Research

We know that young people are more likely to use a drug if they think they have nothing to lose by doing so.

In 1999, the National Institute on Drug Abuse mounted its "Club Drug Initiative" to respond to recent increases in the abuse of MDMA and other drugs, such as GHB, Rohypnol, ketamine, and Methamphetamine. This ongoing national initiative seeks to increase awareness of the dangers of these drugs among teens, adults, parents, and communities.

Ecstasy users perceive a factual disconnect between media messages about the dangers of MDMA and what people in their social networks are telling them about experiences with the drug. Often young people falsely believe MDMA can be used casually with few problems beyond a possible increase in anxiety, depression, and restlessness.

Research clearly shows there is a major misperception among users that MDMA is a "fun" drug with minimal risks.

Medical Consequences

We have already amassed a considerable body of scientific knowledge about the dangers of MDMA. This drug can produce significant and dangerous increases in heart rate and blood pressure that can last for several hours.

MDMA abusers usually take multiple tablets within brief time periods, often along with other commonly abused substances, such as alcohol. Many times abusers dance for extended periods in hot and crowded conditions. Collectively, these multiple factors can dangerously increase MDMA's toxicity.

Resulting medical complications can lead to dehydration, hyperthermia, seizures, and heart or kidney failure. In fact, there have been double digit increases in MDMA-related emergency room incidents from 2000 to 2002.

Medical reports increasingly show that regular MDMA use also causes potentially long-lasting damage to the user's brain cells.

Summary Findings

MDMA users may not think that transient mood disturbances are too high a price to pay for MDMA's euphoric effects. **However, these medical symptoms provide a warning that potentially serious underlying brain damage is occurring.**

Depletions in the serotonin content in tissues and decreases in the structural components of serotonin neurons, which enable the cells to convey sig-

nals, can permanently change the brain's chemistry. These problems are occurring in the critical serotonin neurotransmitters, which help regulate mood, pain, appetite, and sleep.

Driving widespread increases in the drug's abuse is the dangerous myth that Ecstasy is a benign drug. This lack of knowledge on the part of young people is challenging our communities to effectively convey credible information in ways that will reduce this abuse.

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