

Ecstasy

Ecstasy is the common name for the illegal synthetic drug called methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). It is both a stimulant and a hallucinogen, since it speeds up the workings of the central nervous system and alters the user's perception of reality. It is commonly used as a mood enhancer at parties and nightclubs.

MDMA was originally developed in Germany. Today ecstasy is generally made in illegal laboratories, which means the person taking it has no idea if the dose will be strong or weak, or even if it will contain any MDMA at all. It is possible for ecstasy tablets to contain little or no MDMA. They may contain other chemicals such as amphetamines, PMA or ketamine that may have unexpected or dangerous effects.

Ecstasy is usually swallowed as a tablet, but it can also come in powder form. Common slang terms include the 'love drug', 'E' and 'eckies'. Ecstasy effects begin in around an hour and might last for up to 32 hours.

How ecstasy works

When we are stressed or under threat, the central nervous system readies us for physical action by creating particular physiological changes. These may include the release of adrenalin and other stress hormones. Key functions like heart rate and blood pressure may increase, redirecting blood flow into the muscles and away from the gut.

As a nervous system stimulant, ecstasy works by prompting the brain to initiate this 'fight or flight' response and the user feels refreshed by a burst of energy. Ecstasy's hallucinogenic properties distort the user's experience of reality by triggering hallucinations of both sight and sound.

Ecstasy is renowned for the feelings of peace and love it invokes. This could be caused by an elevation in particular brain chemicals, or neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and dopamine. Coming down from ecstasy is an unpleasant experience. Symptoms can include fatigue, aching muscles and depression.

Common effects of ecstasy

The effects of ecstasy depend on the strength of the dose, and the physiology and state of mind of the person taking the drug. Generally, some of the immediate effects of ecstasy include:

- Feelings of confidence, happiness and benevolence
- Accelerated heart rate and breathing
- Rise in blood pressure
- Sweating and dehydration
- Nausea
- Jaw clenching and teeth grinding
- Loss of appetite
- Hallucinations
- An increased urge for sex
- Loss of inhibitions.

The symptoms of ecstasy overdose

People with certain disorders – such as epilepsy, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, kidney disease, or mood or psychiatric disorders – are at greater risk of harm if they take ecstasy. In high doses, ecstasy can cause seizures and vomiting. The symptoms of overdose include a sharp rise in body temperature and blood pressure, dizziness, cramps, heart palpitations and vomiting.

Ecstasy can cause death in a number of ways, including:

- Cardiac arrest

- Stroke
- Kidney failure
- Overheating (hyperthermia) and dehydration
- Dilutional hyponatremia, when the user 'drowns' their brain by drinking too much water.

Dependence, tolerance and withdrawal

It is unknown whether ecstasy is physically addictive or not. Many users say that it is hard to stop taking the drug, and this might indicate that it is possible to become psychologically dependent. Like many other drugs, a user can build up a tolerance to ecstasy. This means they want to take larger and larger doses to try and achieve the same effect. However, this tends to increase the intensity of the unpleasant side effects instead.

Damage caused by long-term ecstasy use

There has been little research on the long-term health hazards of taking ecstasy. Studies suggest that some of the problems may include:

- Permanent damage to the brain cells that make the neurotransmitter serotonin, which is involved in mood regulation, body temperature, appetite and sex drive
- Liver damage
- Delusions
- Panic attacks
- Depression
- Risk of HIV, hepatitis infection, blood poisoning or skin abscesses if ecstasy in powder form is injected using shared needles
- Hallucinogenic flashbacks that can occur weeks, months or even years after taking the drug
- Susceptibility to having unprotected sex, which increases the risk of contracting sexually transmissible infections (STIs)
- The need to use other drugs to balance the side effects of ecstasy.

Liquid ecstasy is different to ecstasy

The drug known as 'liquid ecstasy' is a different drug to ecstasy. Liquid ecstasy is gamma-hydroxybutyrate or GHB. It is also known as grievous bodily harm (GBH) or fantasy.

GHB is a depressant drug, with sedative and anaesthetic effects. GHB is usually a colourless, odourless, bitter or salty-tasting liquid, sold in small bottles or vials. It also comes as a bright blue liquid, sometimes called 'blue nitro', or as a crystal powder.

GHB is sometimes used in the dance and club scene as it can produce feelings of euphoria, relaxation and sociability, and an increased urge for sex.

Because it has no colour or smell, GHB is a drug that is used to spike drinks. It produces symptoms of drowsiness, amnesia and impaired movement and speech, as well as more serious symptoms of agitation, unconsciousness and respiratory collapse.

Overdoses of GHB have been linked to at least 10 deaths in Australia. The risk of overdose increases when GHB is combined with other drugs or alcohol.

Type of help available

Treatment options for drug addiction include detoxification, individual counselling and group therapy. See your doctor for information and referral, or contact an alcohol and other drug service in your area.

Where to get help

- If an overdose is suspected, call an ambulance immediately. Dial triple zero (000)
- Your doctor
- DrugInfo Clearinghouse Tel. 1300 858 584 – for information
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral
- YSASLine Tel. 1800 014 446 – for information, counselling and referral to youth-specific alcohol and other drug services
- Family Drug Help Tel. 1300 660 068

Things to remember

- Ecstasy is an illegal synthetic drug that is both a nervous system stimulant and a hallucinogen.
- Ecstasy can cause death in many ways including heart attack, stroke, overheating and if a person drinks too much water.
- Liquid ecstasy (GHB) is a different drug with a sedative effect that can also cause death.

Want to know more?

Go to More information for support groups, related links and references.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Drug Foundation

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