
GHB

Summary

- GHB is a party drug that produces feelings of euphoria, relaxation and sociability.
 - Side effects of GHB can include drowsiness, amnesia and impaired movement and speech, as well as more serious symptoms of agitation, unconsciousness and respiratory collapse.
 - The risk of overdose increases when GHB is combined with other drugs such as alcohol.
 - GHB is often known as 'liquid ecstasy', but it is a completely different drug to ecstasy.
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Gamma-hydroxybutyrate, or GHB, is an illegal drug that is sometimes used as a 'party drug' in the dance and club scene. It produces feelings of euphoria, relaxation and sociability, and an increased urge for sex. GHB acts as a nervous system depressant and poses a risk for dependence. . Even a small increase in dose can cause serious effects or death.

GHB is often known as 'liquid ecstasy', but it is a completely different drug to ecstasy. Other names for GHB include grievous bodily harm (GBH) or fantasy.

How GHB is used

GHB was first manufactured and studied in the 1960s and used as a general anaesthetic. It was also widely available in the 1980s as a dietary supplement and bodybuilding product. GHB has since been withdrawn from use in many countries because of unwanted side effects. It is now an illegal (illicit) drug in Australia. GHB is sometimes used to spike drinks and has been involved in cases of sexual assault. It is easy to slip it into a drink, because it has no colour or smell and it can cause drowsiness, sleep and short-term memory loss. This means that victims may not be able to resist or recall a sexual assault. For this reason, it is sometimes known as a '**date rape**' drug.

How GHB works

GHB is a depressant that occurs naturally in the brain and has sedative and anaesthetic effects. Depressant substances slow down the activity of the brain and other parts of the central nervous system. Other drugs that have depressant effects include alcohol, heroin and benzodiazepines.

GHB comes in a few forms including:

- a colourless, odourless, bitter or salty-tasting liquid – sold in small bottles or vials
- a coloured liquid
- crystals or powder (this is less common).

Common effects of GHB

Generally, the effects of GHB are felt within 15 minutes and last for around three hours. GHB effects vary greatly depending on the amount used. A small increase in amount can result in a dramatic increase in its effects. This is one of the most dangerous aspects of using GHB. There is a very small difference between the amount a person may take to produce the desired effect and the amount that results in overdose.

In moderate amounts, GHB can produce feelings of:

- relaxation
 - drowsiness
 - sociability
 - euphoria
 - lack of inhibition
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- an increased urge for sex
- heightened sensitivity to touch.

High dose effects of GHB

High doses of GHB can result in:

- dizziness
- vomiting
- tremors
- tunnel vision
- loss of coordination (ataxia)
- confusion, irritation and agitation
- hallucinations
- blackouts and memory lapses
- seizures
- coma
- respiratory arrest (stopping breathing) and death.

GHB – dependence, tolerance and withdrawal

GHB dependence can be psychological, physical or both. People who regularly use GHB can develop a tolerance and dependence very quickly. 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.

If you are physically dependent on GHB and you stop taking it, you may experience withdrawal symptoms because your body has to readjust to functioning without GHB. Withdrawal symptoms can be very serious and potentially life threatening. They usually start about 12 hours after the last dose and can continue for about 15 days.

Sudden withdrawal from high doses may result in serious symptoms and may require medical assistance. If you want to stop using GHB, speak to a medical professional first.

Damage caused by long-term GHB use

The long-term effects of GHB are still unclear, but the drug is known to pose a risk for dependence.

GHB overdose

The risk of overdose increases when GHB is combined with other drugs such as alcohol. Taking GHB with other depressant drugs is particularly dangerous. Combining GHB with alcohol can lead to nausea, vomiting and unconsciousness, even at low-dose levels.

Signs of overdose include that the person:

- appears to be asleep but cannot be woken
- is incoherent, sweating profusely, vomiting and has irregular or shallow breathing
- is not able to stand, has involuntary muscle contractions or both.

GHB that is not manufactured correctly may result in an extremely toxic mixture of GHB and sodium hydroxide.

In an emergency, call for help

If someone you are with overdoses, or has an adverse reaction while using GHB, dial triple zero (000) to call an ambulance immediately. A quick response can save the person's life. Don't delay getting help because you think you or your friend might get into trouble. Ambulance officers are not obliged to call the police.

Stay with the person until the ambulance arrives and tell the ambulance officers as much as you can about what drugs were taken, how long ago and any pre-existing medical conditions the person may have.

Help available for GHB dependence

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

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **DirectLine** Tel. **1800 888 236** – for confidential counselling, information and referral to a registered methadone prescriber
- **DrugInfo** Tel. **1300 85 85 84** – for alcohol and other drug information
- **Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice service**, Victoria Tel. **1800 458 685** (9 am to 8 pm, Monday to Friday)
- **Family Drug Help** Tel. **1300 660 068** – for information and support for people concerned about a relative or friend using drugs.

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