

A QUICK GUIDE TO **Drugs & Alcohol**

THIRD EDITION

by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC)

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Health



NEW SOUTH WALES

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GHB

G, grievous bodily harm (GBH), fantasy, liquid E, liquid ecstasy, liquid x, 4-hydroxybutanoic acid, blue nitro

GHB stands for **gamma-hydroxybutyrate**, which is a central nervous system depressant (see definition on page 3). Although it is sometimes called 'liquid ecstasy' it is not chemically related to ecstasy and has entirely separate chemical and pharmacological modes of action.

GHB is a naturally occurring substance found in the body. It was first synthesised in the 1960s and developed as an anaesthetic, and has been used as a treatment for a number of medical conditions, including insomnia, depression, narcolepsy and alcoholism. It has also been used by bodybuilders and athletes for its ability to stimulate growth hormone levels. More recently, it has been associated with the nightclub and rave scenes.

GHB usually comes as a liquid, and is sold in vials, bottles or fish-shaped soy sauce containers. It is colourless, but may have colour added to stop it being mistaken for water or other clear liquids. It is odourless and can have either a bitter or a salty taste.

Less often, GHB is found in the form of a white powder.



GHB and the law

It is illegal to use, possess, supply or manufacture GHB in New South Wales.

How GHB is used

GHB is usually swallowed.

Effects

Short-term effects

The short-term effects of GHB include:

- feelings of euphoria and increased wellbeing
- increased libido
- drowsiness
- nausea and vomiting
- visual disturbances
- agitation and dizziness
- coordination
- respiratory depression and distress.

Initial effects occur 15-20 minutes after oral administration, with peak effects occurring 30-60 minutes post-ingestion. The effects of GHB can last from one and a half hours, up to three hours, or even longer if large doses have been consumed.

GBL and 1,4-B

Analogues such as gamma-butyrolactone (GBL) and 1,4-butanediol (1,4-B) are converted to GHB by the body when they are ingested. GHB is reported to have a salty taste, while GBL and 1,4-B are said to have a 'chemical' taste.

Long-term effects

Little is known about the long-term effects of GHB due to the short time it has been used as a recreational drug.

GHB and driving

The short-term effects which include drowsiness, visual disturbances, incoordination and dizziness, mean that it is dangerous and illegal, to drive while under the influence of GHB.

GHB and pregnancy

Little is known about the effects of GHB on the unborn child. However, it is possible that GHB crosses the placenta in pregnancy, and has some effect on the baby. It is also possible that GHB will be present in breast milk if taken during breastfeeding.

It is generally risky to take any drug while pregnant or breastfeeding without medical advice.

Using GHB with other drugs

When GHB is mixed with other depressants, such as alcohol or benzodiazepines, it increases the depressant effects of both drugs, which may lead to respiratory distress and even death. Small doses of GHB are potentially very potent and when combined with alcohol or methamphetamines the risk of overdose is greatly increased.

Dependence

Dependence (see definition on page 4) can develop with chronic GHB use, although tolerance is not normally observed.

Withdrawal

Binge use does not seem to be a risk for significant withdrawal symptoms – rather, long term continuous use of GHB or its analogues seem to be a pre-requisite for the development of the withdrawal syndrome. Withdrawal symptoms may include insomnia, anxiety, tremors, sweating, hallucinations, increased heart rate and blood pressure, and psychosis. Sudden withdrawal from high doses may require medical assistance, as bladder and bowel incontinence or blackouts may be experienced.

Drink spiking

While there are public perceptions that drugs such as GHB are commonly used to spike drinks, toxicology results do not support these claims. It is often suggested that GHB is used in drink spiking because it can be tasteless, odourless and hard to detect. However, GHB can have a strong salty taste that would be potentially noticeable.

Overdose

Overdosing is a serious danger with GHB. The difference between a dose that produces the desired effects and a dose that produces dangerous effects is very small. Serious adverse effects can include sudden sedation and respiratory distress. Analysis of different vials of GHB has shown that the concentration varies considerably, so users can never be sure of how much they are taking.

Treatment

Evidence from better-researched drugs suggests that services providing good social support, as well as psychological interventions to help maintain motivation and improve coping skills, may be effective (see pages 7-8).

