

12. GHB

(2021 version)

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Introduction

GHB is a colourless, odourless liquid with a slightly salty taste. GHB is the abbreviation for gamma-hydroxybutyrate or sodium oxybate - an anaesthetic with primarily sedative rather than painkilling properties. GHB is also present in the body in small amounts and in certain ripe fruits such as guava. GBL is a precursor to GHB, which means that if GBL is taken, the body will then make it into GHB.

Its use as a drug was developed in the US, for use as a premedication to promote sleep before surgery. Although a sleep-inducing drug, it has also been investigated as a potential treatment for narcolepsy - the chronic inability to stay awake.

How It Is Taken

GHB is sold in small bottles which may have a warning label advising against drinking alcohol at the same time as taking the contents. It has also been seen in powder and capsule form. One UK company that deals in 'smart drugs' has GHB in its catalogue in the form of capsules imported from the USA. The catalogue promotes GHB as a cure for insomnia, tagging it 'Nature's Quaalude'. Quaaludes are the US equivalent of the once popular sedative known in the UK as Mandrax (methaqualone). GHB is easily made using certain solvents and caustic soda (a potentially risky procedure because of the caustic soda).



Standard bottles of GHB appear to contain about 40ml of liquid. Doses are 'measured' out in various ad hoc ways, which would result in different amounts of the drug being swallowed. Some say that a bottle contains roughly 3 doses - about a 15ml tablespoon each. Elsewhere it has been written that the customary dose is 5ml - a teaspoon. Other ways of taking GHB is using small water balloons or fish shape sushi soy sauce containers. Doses can also be measured out as capfuls. GBL can be found in brown bottles with droppers.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that there is no telling how concentrated the liquid is. Any given bottle could contain quite a mild dose of around 3 grams of the drug, or a very high dose of up to 20 grams. Where people have simply swallowed the whole bottle, dosages at this level would help explain some of the more extreme reactions listed below. As with barbiturates, there appears to be a narrow margin between the dosage required to achieve the desired intoxication effects and the dosage which induces coma.

So far GHB seems to have found favour with two groups of users. It has been used by bodybuilders because it promotes what is known as 'slow wave sleep', during which growth hormone is secreted. Growth hormone increases muscle protein levels which build up muscular strength.

The other group is those on the dance and club scene both here and in the US. In Britain its use has particularly been noted in gay clubs. One street name for GHB

is 'liquid ecstasy'. However, people are taking the drug for its euphoric and sedative effects (similar to being drunk) rather than as a stimulant dance/partying drug. The drug is mainly taken by mouth, although there is at least one report of users injecting.

Street names for GHB include:

· GBH	· Liquid X	· Liquid E
· GBL	· Liquid Ecstasy	·

Health

GHB is a depressant drug. The effects of GHB are noticeable between 10 minutes and an hour after taking the drug and have been reported as lasting a day or longer. Like alcohol, in small doses GHB has positive effects, such as breaking down social inhibitions and increase libido. Some users have likened the effect to ecstasy, others (who are old enough to remember it) to methaqualone.

As the dosage increases, the positive effects of euphoria give way to powerful sedative effects and there have been reports of the following short-term negative effects:

- nausea
- vomiting
- stiffening of muscles
- disorientation
- convulsions
- coma
- respiratory collapse

Clearly, any dangers will be enhanced from mixing the drug with other sedative drugs and will also be determined by the weight and gender of the person, their general health etc.

Because of the combination of its form and effects, GHB has been used as a date rape drug.

It can be quite hard to tell if someone has taken this drug. The only way they might behave when they've taken it is that they may be happy and perhaps a little bit sleepy, as if they are slightly drunk with lowered inhibitions.

At the moment possible long-term consequences are unknown.

GHB

The Law and Statistics

Last updated December 2020

The law

GHB, GBL and 1,4-BD are all Class C drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. It is against the law to possess them or to sell them for human ingestion.

GHB was brought under the Misuse of Drugs Act as a Class C drug in 2003. Over time, it became apparent that dealers and users were switching to GBL and 1,4-BD as legal alternatives to GHB, so in 2009, GBL and 1,4-BD were also brought under the control of the Misuse of Drugs Act.

In November 2020, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs advised that GHB should become a Class B drug rather than Class C. This has yet to be decided.

Statistics

There are not many statistics available for GHB as it tends to be grouped with spice and mephedrone but in 2009/10, 0.1% of 16-59-year olds reported to have used it in the last year, and 0.5% of 16-24-year olds reported use in the last year.

(New Psychoactive Substances in England, 2014)

Deaths from GHB have been recorded at 27 in 2018. Ten years previously it was recorded at 20, but it has been as high as 30 deaths in 2016.

(ONS, 2019)