

The Dangers of Designer Drugs.

by Janice Arenofsky

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Designer drugs are illegal, dangerous -- and they can be deadly.

The scene: Five teens driving home early one summer morning from a night of music and dancing.

But this is not a Hollywood movie, and the people in the car--Leah Feldhaus, Nicole Martell, Matthew Lopez, Carissa Castaneda, and Sharon Bjornstad--are not actors. They are real people coming back from an all-night "rave," the nickname for high-intensity techno-music parties at which "designer" drugs--illegal spin-offs of narcotic drugs--are often available. Hours earlier, the California students had been laughing and dancing at a secluded spot in mountains surrounding Los Angeles. They were with 5,000 other young people, many of whom were using drugs. In fact, four students overdosed on the designer drug Ecstasy that August 1999 evening, and had to be airlifted to hospitals.

But Leah, Nicole, Matthew, Carissa, and Sharon encounter an even worse fate. Their car plunges 1,200 feet down a steep highway embankment, killing all of them. Parents, police, and the media begin to question whether drugs played a role. Law enforcement experts say it's highly probable.

The Effects

More than 90 percent of automobile crashes involving teen drivers between the ages of 15 and 20 are the result of drug impairment, says Police Sgt. Chuck Miller, an undercover officer with the Phoenix, Arizona, Youth Alcohol and Education Squad. Sgt. Miller says many teen ravers take drugs and then engage in risky behaviors--getting into fights involving knives and guns, having unprotected sex, or driving cars while drug-impaired.

We don't call their wrecks 'accidents,'" says Sgt. Miller. "We call them collisions." This is because the crashes are not considered accidental when the driver has become impaired due to alcohol or other drugs. Although Sgt. Miller says raves can be drug-free, his squad's zero-tolerance policy toward drugs has led to many arrests in the Phoenix area, where about 25 raves took place last year. The drugs involved included: alcohol, marijuana, LSD, Ecstasy, synthetic heroin, and GHB (also known as "Liquid Blue").

But Ecstasy, or MDMA, is by far the most common drug used. Called the "love drug" for its supposed ability to

produce warm, "touchy-feely" behavior, the drug's many negative effects include: heat stroke and death from a combination of non-stop dancing and dehydration; neurological problems such as depression, anxiety, memory disturbances, and difficulty learning (this usually lasts at least two weeks, says the National Institute on Drug Abuse, or NIDA); muscular tension; fatigue; chills; blurred vision; liver damage; and death from a heart rhythm disturbance. NIDA also links Ecstasy to a higher risk of the development of Parkinson's disease, a brain disorder that can lead to tremors and paralysis.

Other designer drugs are "cooked up" by amateur chemists in illegal, inadequate labs. They can be much more powerful than the original drug. Take fentanyl, a surgical anesthetic. Fentanyl-based designer drugs have been linked to hundreds of breathing-related deaths.

And then there's the risk of mixing drugs. "Teens often combine Ecstasy with alcohol and other designer drugs to increase the high, but {any mixture} also heightens the danger," says Sgt. Miller. He says teens sometimes buy impure drugs. For example; Ecstasy tablets can contain a mix of other potentially dangerous drugs such as oriental herbal ephedrine ("Ma Huang") and ketamine ("Special K").

"Teens sometimes think the worst that can happen is the drug has been cut down and a harmless substance added," says Sgt. Miller. "But even if soap or detergent is the filler, you can still get real sick if you consume enough."

Been There, Done That

"I have seen almost every drug you can think of at a rave," says Mike, 18, from Boulder, Colorado. Acid, mushroom, speed, nitrous gas, and GHB (a 'date rape' drug)."

Mike also says that while Ecstasy is not physically addictive, it is "mentally addictive." As for GHB, Mike says a heavy dose "can make you pass out or get sick."

Fifteen-year-old Eric, from Naples, Florida, says that while Ecstasy provides a "closeness with individuals around you," too much of the drug causes "serotonin syndrome." The symptoms of overproducing the brain chemical serotonin can range from confusion and nausea to paranoia and chills.

And reactions vary greatly. The first time Adam tried Ecstasy, he felt OK. But the next few times the teen got extremely depressed. "It was so bad, I never even danced

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"he says.

Although some kids choose to do drugs at raves, most teens go to raves primarily for the exciting, carnival-like atmosphere, says filmmaker Jon Reiss, who produced a documentary about raves and says it's hard to generalize about them. In a recent interview with the Los Angeles Daily News, Reiss said, "A significant number of kids don't do any drugs whatsoever. You get so much energy from the music, you don't need drugs."

Stacy, from Ontario, Canada, says, "There are a lot of drugs, but I don't need them--the music, the lights, and the people are enough."

Still, according to law enforcement experts, some teens are not only hooked on raves; they're hooked on the designer drugs sold there. Eric, who got a hangover from Ecstasy, says he now dislikes the rave scene. "After the initial high, ravers are generally moody, impatient, and looking to get spends his entire allowance on Ecstasy. "He lies to his parents, and if a couple of bucks is all he has, {instead of Ecstasy} he buys acid or another cheaper drug."

The Deciding Factor

Is taking designer drugs worth the serious health risks? Here's what a male teenager said watching someone being carried out of a rave: "She's overdosed on something. I'm frightened, she looks so awful--like she could die right here."

Fight Your Personal Drug War

See if you've got what it takes to win the war against drugs. Answer "yes" or "no" to the following questions:

1. Do you think it's smart to always agree with your friends? Yes No
2. Do you think drugs will solve your problems about school, dating, family? Yes No
3. Do you think drugs are smart stress-relievers? Yes No
4. Do you think drugs will increase your confidence, make you "as (smart, attractive, cool, etc.) as the other kids"? Yes No
5. Do you think drugs are good ways to relieve boredom? Yes No
6. Do you think it's OK to risk your body and mind taking

drugs? Yes No

7. Do you think getting busted is cool? Yes No

8. Do you really want to get into trouble with your parents or school administrators? Yes No

9. Do you think doing drugs is a good way to make new friends who respect you? Yes No

10. Do you think drugs are an intelligent way to have harmless fun? Yes No

What's Your Score?

One or more yeses--You should work on your critical thinking skills. Discuss these questions with a trusted friend, teacher, parent, or counselor.

Zero yeses--You're on the right track.