

The Hazards of Ecstasy

MDMMA, often called "Ecstasy," is a drug that creates a sensation of closeness, but which at high levels of ingestion can become toxic—sometimes causing death. Use of Ecstasy is on the rise, especially among students in grades eight through 12. The NEA Health Information Network talked to Cardwell Nuckols, an author and authority on drug abuse, to learn about Ecstasy and how to help keep young people drug-free.

What is Ecstasy?

Ecstasy or MDMA (methylenedioxy-methamphetamine) is a stimulant drug that has both the effects of methamphetamine ("speed") and mescaline (a hallucinogenic drug found in certain mushrooms). MDMA is often described as a designer drug that has a similar chemical structure to methamphetamine. MDMA is illegal, and classified as a Schedule I Controlled Substance. Known on the street as Adam, XTC, Clarity, Lovers Speed, Eve, and X, Ecstasy is typically packaged in tablet, capsule, or powder form and is taken orally. Often the drug is made to look like a prescription drug in capsule or tablet form. Ecstasy tablets are often imprinted with logos to make them more appealing to the user. The typical street price is anywhere from \$20 to more than \$30 per pill.

Who uses Ecstasy?

The typical user is a high school, college student, or young adult, although there is evidence of use in the preteen population. MDMA is known as a "club drug" because it was once used largely at all-night dance parties and clubs called "raves" or "trances." Unfortunately, its use has expanded to include home parties and small gatherings. In 2000, a study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) found that 3.1 percent of eighth-graders, 5.4 percent of 10th-graders and 8.2 percent of 12th-graders have used the drug.

What are Ecstasy's effects?

An Ecstasy high can last anywhere from six to 24 hours. Users report that the drug causes euphoria, feelings of well-being, enhanced emotional and mental clarity, increased energy, heightened sensitivity to touch, and enhanced sexuality.

At high doses MDMA can cause hallucinations, sensations of lightness and floating, depression, paranoia, and irrational behavior, including violence. Individuals may experience jaw-clenching and teeth-grinding, irritation, headaches, vomiting, panic/anxiety, convulsions, heart attack, brain damage, exhaustion, dehydration, and heatstroke. While



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under the influence of the drug the user may dance for hours at a time at a "rave" or techno-music party without rest or hydration. Without rest and water consumption, body temperature can be raised to dangerous levels followed by collapse and heat stroke.

Death can occur, especially if the dehydration and enhanced body temperature are not controlled. In some users confusion, depression, sleep problems, anxiety, and paranoia have been reported even weeks after the drug is taken.

Long-term use of Ecstasy appears to produce damage to the serotonin systems in the brain. Serotonin plays a part in regulating emotion, memory, sleep, pain, and higher-order cognitive processes.

This damage can cause many different cognitive and behavioral disturbances, including impairment of memory. Despite the danger, or in ignorance of it, many take Ecstasy simply to feel good or to combine stimulation with feelings of affection, warmth, and love. Also, because the drug dramatically increases energy

levels, it reduces the perceived need to eat, drink, or sleep. As a result, users can endure all-night, and sometimes two- or three-day dance parties.

What are the symptoms of Ecstasy use?

A person who's taken the drug may exhibit a rapid heart rate, dilated pupils, distractibility, and confusion. Other signs include jaw-clenching and teeth-grinding, skin hot to the touch, and heavy perspiration.

How can schools and school employees help prevent Ecstasy use?

Education is the answer. All school employees, parents, and students must be educated about Ecstasy use and about addiction. Schools should have an in-house or outside specialist available for assistance. Resources on understanding and preventing drug abuse and addiction should be made available. Too often students get drug information from their friends or from pro-drug Web sites. ✓

The following are possible short-term side effects of taking Ecstasy (MDMA):

- Nausea
- Depression
- Panic or anxiety
- Dehydration
- Teeth-grinding
- Muscle-cramping
- Headache
- Paranoia and hallucinations
- Increased body temperature
- Irrational behavior, including violence
- Convulsions, heart attack, or death

Below are possible long-term side effects of taking Ecstasy (MDMA):

- Addiction and tolerance
- Damage to brain cells, leading to memory loss
- Risk of contracting or spreading sexually transmitted diseases

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

• Cardwell Nuckols, Ph.D is an internationally recognized authority on such issues as child and adolescent disruptive disorders and alcohol and drug abuse and addiction. He has published 14 books and workbooks, and numerous video and audio series. He can be reached at cnuckols@elitecorp.org or at www.cardwellnuckols.com.

Web Sites

• White House Office of National Drug Control Policy's National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign: www.freevibe.com for kids; www.TheAntiDrug.com for parents; and www.teachersguide.org for educators.

• National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA): www.clubdrugs.org; and www.nida.nih.gov/drugpages/mdma.html; and http://165.112.78.61/NIDA_Notes/NNVol14N4/Ecstasy.html.

• National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information: www.health.org/govpubs/prevalert/v3i25.htm.