

New drug challenges cocaine as the choice of yuppiedom

By Lynn Emmerman
and Jon Van

It is a shimmery white powder that some think is the chemical key to enlightenment. Taking it simulates the effect of years of therapy, some psychologists say. Users describe feeling intensely peaceful and empathic.

But the federal government maintains that MDMA is a dangerous and virtually untested narcotic that may irrevocably damage the mind.

Despite the controversy, or perhaps because of it, MDMA, also known as "Ecstasy," is becoming increasingly popular with young urban professionals and college students in the West and along the East Coast. The laboratory-produced drug has recently begun to filter into cities across the country, according to the federal Drug Enforcement Administration.

"I think yuppies everywhere will love 'X-ing' (taking Ecstasy). It gets you slightly high without taking away your control. Yuppies like that," said a 32-year-old North Side computer operator who has taken the pill drug. Though Ecstasy is not readily available in

Chicago, she said, "It's on its way. Already, you can find it if you know where to look."

Frank Sapienza, a chemist with the drug agency, cautiously echoed her prediction. "Will MDMA replace cocaine as the drug of the late '80s? It's too soon to tell, but it's definitely possible," he said.

Noting Ecstasy's growing popularity, the agency effectively banned the drug this month. As of July 1, Ecstasy will be classified as a Schedule I controlled substance, a category customarily reserved for dangerous narcotics that have a high potential for abuse. The scheduling was an emergency measure that will be effective for one year, during which public hearings will be held to determine whether Ecstasy has therapeutic value.

The drug agency acted after two University of Chicago researchers found that a drug similar to Ecstasy may work by destroying large numbers of vital brain cells.

Therapists who have taken the drug and given it to patients, as well as other professionals who identify with "global consciousness" and "romantic ecology" reminiscent of the 1960s, have

strongly protested the government's banning of Ecstasy. They say the drug does everything from breaking down barriers between lovers to enhancing trust and banishing jealousy.

The Earth Metabolic Design Foundation, a Berkeley think tank is supporting several research projects on MDMA. Some of the drug's proponents have even retained a New York-based law firm to argue their case to the government. Ecstasy also has supporters in the Midwest.

"MDMA is a very good drug," said June Riedlinger, 35, a pharmacist who lives in west suburban Brookfield. "It helps people reduce their anxiety about what they see about problems in themselves and interpersonal communication. The drug's good effects can last quite long time."

"When I took it, I experienced slight enhancement of color and sound. I felt very calm. I could see my thoughts and conflicts in positive light. My sense of peace with the universe was exaggerated slightly."

Riedlinger said she learned

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about the drug from her former education psychology professor, Dr. Thomas Roberts of Northern Illinois University, who teaches a course in psychedelic research.

Said Roberts: "People who take Ecstasy get along better in their family relations and are more aware of the aspect of love in their lives." Roberts described his encounter with MDMA as experiencing "an intense feeling of love in the brotherly sense, not the sexual arousal sense."

Unlike MDMA's more strident proponents, Roberts does not recommend the drug for street use. He thinks it should be used under close supervision as part of psychotherapy. "Realistically, you can't keep Ecstasy off the street. You have to encourage the proper use of it—for example, the proper dosage.

"Banning the drug just forces the manufacturers further underground and drives up the price. You're going to see a lot of street dealers selling all sorts of garbage

to kids and telling them it's MDMA."

Roberts' beliefs about the spiritual benefits of Ecstasy are reminiscent of similar claims made about LSD in the 1950s and 1960s. But some of that drug's users experienced mental, emotional and chromosomal damage. Ecstasy's detractors say it may be just as dangerous.

At the Haight Asbury Free Medical Clinic in San Francisco, workers have noted an influx of teenagers who take multiple doses of Ecstasy for a strong stimulant effect. "These kids are getting wired. They experience racing heartbeats, anxiety and delusions," said Rick Seymour, training director at the clinic.

Seymour said MDMA use is too new to detect patterns of addiction, if indeed the drug is addictive. "What we're seeing now is a fad. A drug like this really belongs to the research scientist and experienced physician," he added.

But all too often Ecstasy is being handled by drug dealers, federal agents say. The sale of the drug is openly promoted in flyers and business cards circulated on the street in Texas and California.

"The cards say, 'Take Ecstasy,

a great experience,'" Sapienza said. "In Texas, dealers are holding Ecstasy parties where for \$25 you get one pill and a stack of literature urging you to distribute the drug. It's being falsely touted as a safe and legal euphoriant."

University of Chicago researchers recently made disturbing discoveries about Ecstasy's possible effects. Doctors Charles Schuster and Lewis Seiden experimented with the effect of the drug MDA, which is chemically similar to MDMA. They found that the drug kills brain cells and actually may speed up the aging process. The effect of that brain-cell death may have no immediate effect, but it can be devastating as MDA users age and normal aging further depletes brain cells.

Another drug, methamphetamine, which also is chemically similar to Ecstasy, can cause a degeneration in the nerve cells responsible for body movement, Schuster and Seiden found.

Though it is not a new drug, almost no research has been conducted on Ecstasy. All but forgotten until its recent resurrection by underground chemists, Ecstasy was developed in 1914 as part of unsuccessful research to develop

an appetite suppressant. It was unregulated by law until this year.

Evidence that MDMA was being abused for recreational use surfaced in the early 1970s, Sapienza said.

The drug is a little-known derivative of sassafras or nutmeg oil. The letters MDMA stand for 3,4 methylenedioxymethamphetamine, a substance that is related to amphetamines, or "speed," and mescaline, which produces hallucinations.

MDMA is a designer drug, a laboratory produced "analog" that is developed by altering several molecules of another known narcotic. Designer-drug chemists create analogs to stay one step ahead of police. By slightly altering the chemical makeup of a drug, they create a substance that is not regulated by law. The danger in this practice lies in the chance that some of these new chemical creations can be Frankensteins with deadly side effects.

"Ecstasy clearly illustrates the problems of regulating analogs," Sapienza said. "Rumor is that since we outlawed MDMA, underground chemists have already come up with a new untested drug. They call this one MDE."