

Living

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Latest 'designer' drug makes officials wary, users heady; But everyone is calling it

ECSTASY

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QUESTION: WHAT is the most common initial reaction to Ecstasy?

Answer: In almost all cases of having witnessed peoples (sic) first experience with Ecstasy, there are two things that come out. One is that it is the most beautiful experience they have ever had; and the other, that they would like to share this experience with certain people, and they will usually name off three or four of their closest friends and one or two relatives.

— from an anonymously published field guide to Ecstasy

It's here, whether certain people want it to be or not, and it's called Ecstasy. It is not a perfume or a line of jeans. Far from it. It is a recreational drug — in jargon, a designer drug — that has become the most recent contender for drug of preference among those for whom fashion and chemical euphoria still rank high on a list of personal priorities.

and its chemical composition is related both to amphetamines (speed) and mescaline. Its effect, said William Tedford, a professor of psychology at SMU who teaches a class there titled "Behavioral Action of Drugs," is a combination of a minor stimulant and a minor hallucinogenic, making it "like taking cocaine and LSD together, after having watered them down considerably." MDMA is also a second cousin of MDA, a psychedelic that in the 1960s and early '70s became known, because of its profound but still workable effects, as "the businessman's LSD." Ecstasy, too, is said by users to leave them with their faculties while getting them high.

"MDMA is somewhat similar to mescaline, a lighter psychedelic than LSD,

that doesn't create the ego loss or dissociative effect of either," said Rick Seymour, a director of physician training and education at the Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic in San Francisco, a drug abuse center that generally witnesses the cutting edge of new drug trends. "From what we've heard, the effect is more of people put in touch with their feelings and consciousness."

The opening of windows on to one's internal plumbing indeed appears to have been the seed from which the drug grew. Ecstasy was first synthesized, or "designed," by a California biochemist named Alexander Shulgrin. The anonymously published field guide mentioned above says Shulgrin created the drug during the '70s for the CIA in its search for "the ultimate truth serum," and that MDMA was his contribution. But Seymour said this genesis is dubious, though he did describe Shulgrin as someone "involved in this for a long time, a biochemist interested in these chemicals who publishes his results, and who then synthesizes some more."

Shulgrin could not be reached for comment.

MDMA indeed is used by a handful of psychiatrists across the country in various kinds of psychotherapy. The drug tends to dissolve both psychological and by psychiatrists who use it as an aid in helping people "get in touch with feelings ordinarily not available to them," "healing fear" and making it "easier to look at the issues in your life and it brings about a quality of acceptance."

But Dallas psychiatrists contacted for this story knew of no one locally who used MDMA in his therapy. And George Lewis, former alcohol education specialist at SMU, added that MDMA "is not part of traditional therapy in any sense, and I doubt if it will assume a position of prominence in therapy."

The debate over Ecstasy's therapeutic powers appears to hold little relevance for those who take it locally. Testimonials to Ecstasy among recreational drug users here abound. Their delight with the drug seems less in the windows it opens on to their souls as in what is considered by satisfied users as the

So far, the street reviews have been raves. How popular Ecstasy has become in Dallas and elsewhere is still hard to gauge. One Southern Methodist University official said the scuttlebutt on campus is "it's everywhere." Police officials, however, said they are hearing about it more than they are seeing it. But according to those who have tried it (it's sold in both tablet and capsule form for \$20 to \$25 per 100-milligram dose), or who run in those circles where it is being tried, the drug over the last several months has at least become a growing phenomenon.

This is especially true in Dallas, those same sources note, among SMU students and the habits of both the geographic and psychic strip known as Greenville Avenue. As a result, Ecstasy is currently considered somewhat "upscale" and "adult-oriented" in its appeal; in the same manner once attendant to cocaine,

drug's two strengths: its gentle kick and mild euphoria, which allow one to feel

high without feeling drugged; and the sense-heightening, libido-swelling effect of an aphrodisiac.

"It makes me real happy, like coke [cocaine] does, but it doesn't keep me awake like speed," said one 30-year-old professional who has tried Ecstasy several times. Though Ecstasy at this point is legal, this professional, as with other users who were interviewed, asked to remain anonymous.

"My most distinct feeling is feeling very good about myself, very confident," he continued. "Unlike other things I've taken, this doesn't drastically alter my mood, doesn't make me feel all of a sudden, wow, I'm on drugs. I just felt real good."

"I only heard about it two months ago. A friend had some, said it was wonderful. He likened it to LSD without the trip. I felt very aware of things while I was on it, but I don't feel like I had insight into what was going on."

"It tends to make one feel around — it arouses the senses," he added. "I noticed myself touching people. I don't usually do that. It made me flirty, which is something I don't normally do a lot. It put me in a playful mood."

"It brings out body sensations," said another user, a man in his mid-30s. "It's definitely a body drug. It unlocks those doors."

The drug's popularity also owes something to the fashion sense and eternal search for the Holy Grail — or at least the ultimate drug — of drug users.

"I think people are starting to look for something else," said John Swartz, spokesman for the Drug Enforcement Agency in Houston. "Cocaine is still a trendy drug, but drug users are always looking for something else."

"It's not much different than keeping up with trendy restaurants," SMU's Tedford said. "It's like when you've eaten at the latest trendy restaurant, you're part of the conversation when it swings in that direction."

"Ecstasy is a trendy drug, so it is siphoning off some cocaine users who were using it because it's fashionable. But it's drawing more from people who were using LSD. The trouble with LSD is that unless you're experienced, or you're with a friend who's experienced, it goes on for 16 hours and you can begin freaking out."

"People using Ecstasy say it's difficult to get in too much trouble with it. I think it's a lot cosier to control. It doesn't last as long, and unless you gulp down a half dozen tablets, you're not going to get in much trouble."

though as the drug's popularity has spread, its class and age distinctions appear to have thinned proportionally. According to Evilu Pridgeon, specialist with the drug abuse prevention program at the Dallas Independent School District, a segment of high school students is believed to be taking it, too. The drug is also particularly attractive to weekend experimenters, and for one very good

reason: According to law enforcement officials, Ecstasy at this point is not illegal.

"It's going to have an appeal, especially to people in a place like Dallas," Dr. Joseph Gaspari, psychiatrist with the Timberlawn Psychiatric Hospital, said of designer drugs in general and Ecstasy in particular. "It appeals to their designer instincts."

So what is Ecstasy?

The origin of its silk-hose, sex-laced name ("Some of the medical people here say it's unfortunate it picked up a name like Ecstasy," said one attorney at a California drug abuse clinic) is fuzzy, though it generally is believed to come from its laboratory designation, "XTC." Its legitimate chemical designation is MDMA — methylenedioxy-methamphetamine —

So what's the problem? Why is DEA and the Food and Drug Administration currently working to get MDMA classified as a controlled substance, which would allow law enforcement officials to crack down on its use?

For one thing, according to Seymour, some kids already are gulping down a half-dozen or more of the tablets in an attempt to make the drug work as an amphetamine. And because the drug is believed to be manufactured in clandestine labs, quality control is non-existent.

Tedford said Ecstasy doesn't seem to be sold through the same channels as cocaine and marijuana. "Most people in the Dallas area are buying it from friends who come back from California," he said. Seymour added, "You also have a situation when a drug becomes popular by word of mouth of people starting to push anything, and calling it something else."

There also has been no long-term testing of the drug. Taken moderately over a short period of time, Ecstasy so far has shown no substantially negative effects. But what about those who take it over a longer period of time? SMU's Lewis called it "near criminal to allow a substance as untested as this is to become so widely circulated." He added, "My hunch is we'll have an experience like with LSD in the '60s."

But others in the medical and drug-abuse fields are more optimistic, if guardedly so. Seymour, for instance, said Ecstasy has "relatively low abuse potential." As far as he can determine, it is a drug for which users seem to develop neither a tolerance nor a dependence.

Still, he and others remain wary. "In the past, we've said something has a low abuse potential, and it's spread like wildfire and ended up having a high abuse potential," Seymour said. "I don't want to glorify it. A lot of us in the treatment field thought cocaine was relatively benign — that it was self-restricting, you could only use so much. Now we have treatment centers filled with cocaine addicts."