

Sales brisk as clock runs down on drug

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For one more week, you can — quite legally — fry your brain at a discount.

At midnight Sunday, it will become a federal crime. Until then, it's a going-out-of-business sale for folks who for months have sold, also quite legally, the drug called Ecstasy.

Ecstasy is a "designer" drug — a chemical derivative of a federally controlled drug, methylenedioxy-amphetamine, commonly called MDA. Ecstasy was developed in the past year, and the law only recently caught up with it. It wasn't classified and thus fell under no regulation; users and sellers couldn't be prosecuted.

Users say Ecstasy produces a feeling of euphoria. Medical studies have shown that MDA — a white powder that is sniffed, swallowed or injected intravenously — destroys nerve terminals in the brain, affecting motor functions and thought processes, perhaps irreversibly.

The difference between MDA and Ecstasy — also called MDMA, ADAM, XTC or M&M — is that it is made from methamphetamine instead of amphetamine.

That variation makes little difference in the effect of the drug. But for people out to make a fast buck dealing in drugs, the chemical difference has translated into hun-

Up Front

dreds of thousands of dollars in legal sales nationwide.

The bottom falls out of the legal market at midnight Sunday: An emergency ban issued May 31 by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration takes effect, making Ecstasy a "Substance I" controlled drug. It's the second time the agency has issued such a ban using the Comprehensive Controlled Substance Act of 1984. The first time was in March on a so-called synthetic heroin, another designer drug.

As of 12:01 a.m. July 1, anyone caught with less than 5 grams of Ecstasy — including a trace of the drug — can be assessed a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison and a \$125,000 fine. For possession of more than 5 grams, the maximum penalty is 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

Until then, a price war is waging. The tactics vary, including hawkers on the streets wearing T-shirts saying "Ecstasy Sold Here" and at least one shop issuing discount "coupons."

And sales are soaring: While they still can, buyers want free rein with the drug without the risk of being punished, and vendors — especially in Dallas — want to get rid of their

financial benefits possible.

Ecstasy has a price tag of from \$9 to \$25 for one tablet, or hit. Federal and local officials said it is used mostly by young professionals, college students and gays.

The operator of the custom leather-goods shop at The Ranch, a gay bar on Maple Avenue in Dallas, said Ecstasy is popular among gays because it provides relief from an underlying depression in the community about acquired immune deficiency syndrome. AIDS is a fatal condition that decreases the body's resistance to disease and is prevalent among male homosexuals.

Narcotics officers said Fort Worth doesn't have an Ecstasy market to speak of; the hot spots are Arlington and Dallas.

In Arlington, no bars could be found openly selling the drug; one frequent user there said he knew of nothing but private sales in that city.

Individual sellers were located Friday night on Dallas' Greenville Avenue, known for its trendy bars and eclectic entertainment.

At three Greenville bars, Ecstasy wasn't openly sold, but it wasn't too difficult to find a bar worker or patron who knew where to find the drug. Anyone not knowing an individual seller was told to go to a gay bar and ask for Ecstasy there.

The Ranch is in Oak Lawn, the gay section of Dallas. To buy Ecstasy at the leather goods shop Saturday night, a customer simply asked the man behind the counter for the drug. The cost was \$21.23, which included \$1.23 in state sales tax.

The price was up to \$5 cheaper per unit if the buyer had a discount "coupon," a business card from the shop or one of its subsidiaries with the date issued written on the back.

A member of the leather shop staff said another shop at a Dallas disco also sells Ecstasy and has vendors on Cedar Springs Boulevard, a major Oak Lawn thoroughfare. The vendors wear T-shirts telling of their wares and sell to passers-by for as low as \$9 per tablet, the leather shop worker said.

No such vendors were seen Saturday night on Cedar Springs, however.

The interim between legality and felony has provided some interesting scenes, the leather shop employee said, such as the night a would-be