

What is it?

GHB (or 'GBH' as it has been dubbed on the street and in the press) is gammahydroxybutyrate or sodium oxybate – an anaesthetic with primarily sedative rather than painkilling properties. GHB is also present in the body in small amounts and in certain ripe fruits such as guava.

Its use as a drug was developed in the US, for example, as a premedication to promote sleep before surgery. Although a sleep-inducing drug, it has also been investigated as a potential treatment for narcolepsy – the chronic inability to stay awake. Because of its side-effects (see below), in 1990 the US Food and Drug Administration declared GHB an "unauthorised new drug" and several US states made possession illegal.

What does it look like?

GHB is a colourless, odourless liquid with a slightly salty taste which is sold in small bottles. These bottles might have a warning label advising against drinking alcohol at the same time as taking the contents. It has also been seen in powder and capsule form. One UK company that deals in 'smart drugs' has GHB in its catalogue in the form of capsules imported from the USA. The catalogue promotes GHB as a cure for insomnia, tagging it "Nature's Quaalude". Quaaludes are the US equivalent of the once popular sedative known in the UK as Mandrax (methaqualone).

GHB is easily made using certain solvents and caustic soda (a potentially risky procedure because of the caustic soda).

What about dosages?

The bottles mentioned above appear to contain about 40ml of liquid. Doses are 'measured' out in various ad hoc ways which would result in different amounts of drug being consumed. Some consider a bottle contains roughly three doses – about a 15ml tablespoon each. Elsewhere it has been written that the customary dose is 5ml – a teaspoon. Doses are also measured out as capfuls, an indeterminate quantity in roughly the same range.

Adding to the confusion is that there is no telling how concentrated the liquid is. A given bottle could contain around three grams of the drug, in theory quite a mild dose, or up to 20 grams, a very high dose. Where people have simply swallowed the whole bottle, dosages at anything like this level would help explain some of the more extreme reactions listed below. As with barbiturates, there appears to be a narrow margin between the dosage required to achieve the desired intoxication effects and that which induces coma.

Prices have been reported at around £5 for a capful of liquid and £10-15 a bottle. The mail-order price quoted by the

smart drug company mentioned above is around £16 for 20 capsules each containing 250mg.

Is it legal?

GHB is not controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act, so possession is not an offence. It is classed as a medicine, so unauthorised manufacture and distribution could be an offence under the Medicines Act. However, this law does allow the drug to be legally imported for personal use only.

Who is using it?

So far GHB seems to have found favour with two groups of users. Because it promotes what is known as 'slow wave sleep', during which growth hormone is secreted, GHB has been used by bodybuilders with unknown effect. The other group are those on the dance and club scene both here and in the States. In Britain its use has particularly been noted in gay clubs. One street name for GHB is 'liquid ecstasy'. However, people are taking for the drug for its euphoric and sedative effects rather than as a stimulant which aids dancing – an alternative to getting drunk on alcohol rather than a dance/partying drug. Mainly the drug is taken by mouth, although there is at least one report of users injecting.

What are the effects?

The effects of GHB are noticeable between 10 minutes and an hour after taking the drug and have been reported as lasting a day or longer. Like alcohol, in small doses GHB will break down social inhibitions and increase libido. Some users have likened the effect to ecstasy, others (who remember it) to methaqualone.

As the dosage increases, euphoria gives way to powerful sedative effects and there have been reports of nausea, vomiting, stiffening of muscles, disorientation, convulsions, coma and respiratory collapse.

Although symptoms such as coma can be very frightening for those who witness them, so far people who have been hospitalised because of these symptoms have made a rapid and full recovery. There have been no confirmed deaths from taking GHB. The most serious case was in America where had a user who had also drunk alcohol had to be resuscitated in hospital.

Clearly, any dangers will be enhanced from mixing the drug with other sedative drugs and will also be determined by the weight and gender of the person, their general health and so on. Like any drug with sedative effects, there is the potential for physical and psychological dependence; one case of the former is cited in the literature. Other possible long-term consequences are unknown.