

# GHB: THE FACTS

## WHAT IS GHB?

Gamma hydroxybutyrate (GHB) and precursors (eg GBL gamma-butyrolactone and 1,4-butanediol) are depressant drugs with sedative hypnotic effects, originally developed as pre-surgery anaesthetic. Depressants slow down the activity of the brain and other parts of the central nervous system. Street names include: Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH), \*liquid ecstasy, liquid E, fantasy, blue nitro and liquid. GHB is an illicit substance in Australia.

\*GHB is not related to ecstasy.

### WHAT DOES GHB LOOK LIKE?

GHB is often sold in a liquid form in small bottles or vials but exists less commonly in the form of a white or pale coloured powder or crystals. Colorants are commonly used in production to distinguish the substance from water and other liquids. It is occasionally sold as a crystal powder. GHB may have a bitter or salty taste but when mixed in a beverage it is difficult to detect.

## GHB RELATED EMERGENCY

If you can't wake someone up, they are having seizures, or you are concerned that they may have sustained a head injury from a drug related fall – call an ambulance immediately – dial **Triple Zero (000)**.

If the person has been mixing GHB with other drugs, tell the NSW Ambulance paramedic exactly what they have taken. Paramedics are there to help. Generally paramedics don't involve the police **unless** there is danger to themselves or other people/children, someone dies, or a crime (such as violence or theft) has been committed.

## EFFECTS OF GHB

The effects of GHB appear to vary greatly according to the amount and strength used and whether it is used with alcohol or other drugs. There is a small difference in the amount used to give an effect and the amount that can cause an overdose. One of the most risky aspects in using GHB is a small increase in amount can result in a dramatic increase in effect, i.e. overdose. GHB of different potencies can be sold as the same product. So even if you take your usual dose, it is possible to overdose. A further risk is that there is often no way to be sure that the drug is manufactured correctly. Improperly made GHB may be an extremely toxic substance.

What GHB does to you depends on:

- how much you take
- the strength of GHB you take
- your height and weight
- your general health
- your mood
- your past experience with GHB
- whether you use GHB on its own or with alcohol or other depressant drugs
- whether you use alone or with others, at home or at a party, etc.

### IMMEDIATE EFFECTS

When you have a small amount of GHB (e.g. 1-2 mL), the effects vary greatly from person to person and can last from a few minutes to a few hours. The effects become noticeable from 5 to 20 minutes after ingestion.

### PHYSICAL EFFECTS

You may:

- feel good and confident
- feel excited or upset
- take more risks than usual
- behave in ways you wouldn't normally

- have a heightened sense of touch
- want to have sex
- feel drowsy or sleepy
- feel dizzy
- get headaches
- suffer from tremors
- feel sick
- have diarrhoea or urinary incontinence
- find that your heart beats slower
- find that your body temperature lowers
- vomit
- get tunnel vision
- have blackouts and memory lapses
- have convulsions (fits)
- your heart can stop beating (cardiac arrest)
- overdose
- go into a coma
- impair your capacity as a parent/primary carer of children.

### PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

You may:

- suffer permanent memory lapses
- become uncoordinated (ataxia)
- become disorientated
- feel confused, irritated or agitated
- hallucinate.

### LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Some long-term effects of GHB use are unclear. As GHB is similar to the effects of sedative drugs, it is possible to become physically and psychologically dependent on it (addicted). There is also the potential for tolerance to develop over a period of time to achieve the same (or any) effects as first experienced.

## OVERDOSE

Not knowing the strength of GHB increases the risk of overdose.

Overdose of GHB can happen to anyone. Even small amounts may cause overdose with some people who have an especially strong reaction to it.

When a person overdoses, they may:

- Appear to be asleep but cannot be woken.
- Be incoherent, sweating

profusely, vomiting and have irregular or shallow breathing.

- Not be able to stand and/or have involuntary muscle seizures.

An overdose of GHB can cause:

- slow, irregular or weak heartbeat
- slow breathing or breathing problems
- heart to stop (cardiac arrest)
- coma
- death.

## TOLERANCE AND DEPENDENCE

There is evidence that GHB is highly addictive. People who use GHB regularly can develop a tolerance and dependence very quickly. Tolerance means that you must take more of the drug to feel the same effects you used to have with lower amounts.

Seek help from a doctor or health professional if you find yourself taking multiple doses a day, increasing the amount of number of times you use GHB, or have withdrawal symptoms between doses (e.g. tremor, anxiety, muscle restlessness, skin sensations)

Dependence on GHB can be psychological, physical or both. Dependence on GHB means that it takes up a lot of your thoughts, emotions and activities. Dependence on GHB can lead to a variety of health, money, legal, work and relationship problems.

## MIXING WITH OTHER DRUGS

Combining GHB with other depressant drugs like prescription medications or alcohol slows down the body's central nervous system which is dangerous. The adverse effects of one drug may be greatly increased by the other.

It is increasingly common for GHB to be mixed with alcohol both inadvertently and by choice. Alcohol is particularly dangerous in combination with GHB as it can be difficult to control the dose.

Overdose is a significant risk in such situations.

Mixing alcohol with GHB can at first reduce the effects of GHB, which can lead some to take a higher dose of GHB. But as the alcohol wears off the effects of GHB will increase which can lead to poisoning, coma or death.

## DRINK SPIKING

GHB has been used in drink spiking due to its effects on memory and inhibition that can put a person at risk of overdose, sexual assault, rape or theft.

If you think your drink has been spiked:

- ask someone you trust to get you to a safe place
- visit a hospital or your doctor as soon as possible to test for the presence of drugs.

If you feel unwell or suspect that you have been sexually assaulted then call an ambulance or go to the nearest NSW Health Sexual Assault service or Emergency Department.

Drink spiking is serious and illegal. To prevent drink spiking, it may be best to watch your drink, avoid sharing drinks, buy/pour your own drink and don't accept drinks from people you don't know well or trust.

## WITHDRAWAL

GHB-dependent people may find it very hard to stop using or cut down because of withdrawal symptoms.

Dependence is a major concern because withdrawal from GHB is severe and can be life threatening.

Withdrawal from GHB may last two weeks or longer.

These can include:

- confusion, agitation, anxiety, panic
- insomnia
- shaking
- muscle cramps
- perspiration
- hallucinations
- tachycardia (rapid heartbeat)
- seizures/convulsions (fits)
- delusions or paranoia
- psychosis
- sweats
- hypertension (high blood pressure)
- nausea or vomiting
- blackouts
- bowel and bladder incontinence.

If you experience any of these withdrawal effects it is important to seek help by contacting your doctor and ask for a referral to an alcohol and other drug service.

## PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

As is the case with many other drugs and medication, it is not recommended that people use GHB while pregnant or breastfeeding.

Many drugs can cross the mother's placenta and therefore have some effects on the unborn child. In general, drug use during pregnancy can increase the incidence of babies born early, resulting in low birth-weight babies. If you are using GHB daily, do not suddenly stop

using GHB. Inform antenatal staff of GHB use and attend regular antenatal checkups.

If a mother continues to use GHB while breastfeeding, it is possible that the drug will be present in her milk and may have adverse effects on the baby. Babies are particularly susceptible to overdose.

It is generally risky to take any drug while breastfeeding without medical advice.

## THE LAW

If you possess, use, manufacture, import, sell or give GHB to someone else and get caught, you could face substantial fines and penalties including a prison sentence.

There have been instances where GHB has been used in illegal drink spiking due to its dis-inhibiting and amnesiac effects.

# SELF-HELP ASSOCIATIONS

**Narcotics Anonymous Australia**, a non profit fellowship or society of recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean via a program of complete abstinence from all drugs. Visit [www.na.org.au](http://www.na.org.au)

**Smart Recovery** is a voluntary self-help group that assists people in recovering from alcohol, drug use and other addictive behaviours. Visit [www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au](http://www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au)

# DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF GHB

It is illegal to drive under the influence of drugs including GHB. Anyone under the influence of GHB who kills or injures another person while driving can be sentenced to a term in prison.

Driving under the influence of GHB is considered more dangerous than driving under the influence of alcohol.

# INFORMATION AND ADVICE

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs 24 hours, 7 days a week, call the **National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline: 1800 250 015**. It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in the state or territory you are calling from.

**Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council** provides links to Aboriginal community controlled health services across NSW. Visit [www.ahmrc.org.au](http://www.ahmrc.org.au) for information about AHMRC members including a regional map, information and links to members websites.

**Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC)** provides services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Contact DAMEC on (02) 8113 1301 or for counselling and support services for CALD communities call (02) 8706 0150.

**Drug Info** provides facts and resources on alcohol and other drugs and the prevention of related harm. Visit [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

**State Library of New South Wales Drug Info** provides up to date information on alcohol and other drugs in public libraries throughout NSW. Visit [www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au](http://www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au)

**eheadspace** provides mental health and wellbeing support, information and services for young people (12 – 25 years) and their family and friends. Visit [www.eheadspace.org.au](http://www.eheadspace.org.au)

**Family Drug Support** provides 24-7 telephone support to families in crisis due to drug and alcohol issues. Call the Helpline on 1300 368 186 or visit [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

**Kids Helpline** is a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years. Counselling is offered via the Kids Helpline website [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au) or email, or call 1800 55 1800.

**Nepean Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (NYDAS)** works within a holistic model of care to address a range of issues for young people (12 – 20 years of age) related to their alcohol and other drug use. Call (02) 4734 2129 or (02) 4734 1333.

**NSW Poisons Information Centre** provides the latest poisons information to the public, and toxicology advice to health professionals on the management of poisoned and envenomed patients. Telephone advice is available 24/7 on **131126** from anywhere in Australia.

**NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA)** is a peak drug user organisation in NSW providing harm reduction information and blood borne virus prevention peer education. Visit [www.nuaa.org.au](http://www.nuaa.org.au)

**ReachOut** is an Australian online youth mental health service with a mobile-friendly site and forums where you can access help, information and support. Visit [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com)

**Sexual Health Info Link** provides free and confidential sexual health support and information. Visit [www.shil.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shil.nsw.gov.au)

**TAFE NSW** provides help with education, career development or personal matters. Students can contact a local TAFE/university counsellor. Visit [www.tafensw.edu.au](http://www.tafensw.edu.au)

**Youth Action** is the peak organisation for young people in NSW. Visit [www.youthaction.org.au](http://www.youthaction.org.au) and use the search option to access a directory of NSW youth services.

**Youth Solutions** provides services for young people 12 to 25 years of age and the community including prevention and health promotion, drug and alcohol education, community programs and information and referral. Visit [www.youthsolutions.com.au](http://www.youthsolutions.com.au) or call (02) 4628 2319 [provides services to young people in Macarthur and Wingecarribee].

**NSW Health aims to reduce drug-related harm for individuals and the community by providing the facts, including the possible health, social and economic consequences of using alcohol and other drugs.**

