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Drug Abuse Declines; Assaults Still Occur, Study Says

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Dec. 29, 2005 – Use of the so-called date-rape drug, gamma hydroxybutate, dropped 76 percent over five years in California, a study says.

In the same period, the percentage of users intentionally poisoned with the drug by someone else grew to 42 percent from 14 percent, the study found. Researchers reviewed 1,331 reports to the California Poison Control System involving GHB from 1999 to 2003. The study appears in the *Annals of Emergency Medicine*.

GHB use may also have declined nationwide, said the researchers citing groups such as the American Association of Poison Control Centers. The continuing use of GHB in assaults, including date rape, is disturbing, said lead study author Ilene Anderson, an associate clinical professor at the School of Pharmacy at the University of California at San Francisco.

“Over the last few years, GHB use has fallen off,” Anderson said yesterday in a telephone interview. “However, it has not gone away. It is important to continue our vigilance.”

GHB comes in liquid or powder form and may be colorless and nearly tasteless. That means it may be easily be slipped into someone’s drink without their knowledge. The drug may cause dizziness, euphoria and cause memory loss, Anderson said.

“The amnesiac component is one that unfortunately can be used for malicious intent,” said Anderson, a clinical toxicologist affiliated with the San Francisco division of the California Poison Control System.

The illegal drug is also addictive and can cause fatal side effects, especially when it’s mixed with alcohol, she said.

Surveillance Needed

GHB use may be affected by a host of factors, including laws making it illegal and fewer calls to the poison center by health-care providers as they gained experience in treating cases, the researchers said. More surveillance is needed to confirm drug-use patterns, they wrote.

In most cases, there was no laboratory confirmation of the presence of GHB, the scientists wrote.

That analysis isn't available at most hospitals, and the evidence isn't detectable after six to 12 hours, they said.

Of 262 cases classified as "malicious intent," in which a person reported being drugged without their knowledge, 19 percent involved sexual assault, according to the study. Eighty-seven percent of that group was female, ages 12 to 58 years.

Memory was affected in 38 percent of the malicious intent reports, compared with 11 percent of all other patients. Other types of cases included: accident, abuse and suicide attempts.

The investigators also reviewed statistics from the American Association of Poison Control Centers, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and National Institute on Drug Abuse national surveys. NIDA data didn't support a decrease in high school use only for the five-year period.

The study was financed by the U.S. National Institute on Drug Abuse. The year 2003 was the last year for which complete data was available. The *Annals of Emergency Medicine* is a peer-reviewed journal of the American College of Emergency Physicians, which has more than 23,000 members.

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