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Study warns of 'G' overdose

Gamma hydroxybutyrate (GHB), commonly known as simply 'G', is used alongside more well-established illegal drugs like ecstasy and methamphetamine in the rave and dance scenes. While GHB has generated considerable interest in the community, little is known about the market for the drug and typical patterns of use and harms in Melbourne.

Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre conducted a study of GHB use in Melbourne, the first of its kind, that draws together information from 34 GHB users as well as ambulance service records.

The key findings were:

1. GHB users reported the drug as considerably cheaper and of more consistent purity than ecstasy. A typical session of use was reported as costing \$19 for GHB, compared to \$48 for methamphetamine powder (speed), and \$60 for ecstasy.
2. Around 34% of ecstasy users reported recently using GHB or its analogue 1,4-butanediol (1,4-B). Of these, 38% stated they had passed out or fallen into a coma from GHB/1,4-B use in the last 6 months. Those who used GHB/1,4-B more frequently were more likely to report an overdose. Few reported receiving medical attention for their overdose.
3. GHB users were aware of the risk of overdose, including the augmented risk when GHB is combined with alcohol.
4. There were 150 GHB overdoses attended by ambulance over the period March 2001 to September 2003. Almost all GHB cases were transported to hospital, compared to about three of every four stimulant cases, and only one fifth of heroin cases. Although GHB was used in both public and private settings, ambulances mostly attended GHB overdoses in public settings.

Monica Barratt of Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre said that: *"Our data indicates that overdosing on GHB or its analogue 1,4-B is common among regular users. It is yet to be seen how government- and industry-led campaigns targetting GHB and GHB users have influenced patterns of GHB overdose. Turning Point is well-positioned to continue monitoring these trends into the future, using data collected at regular intervals."*

Ms Barratt has the following advice for those who use 'G': *"Don't hesitate to call an ambulance if someone passes out: the police will not come unless there is violence or death, so you won't get in trouble, but you might save a life."*

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