

Fact Sheet

GHB

AKA: Gamma Hydroxybutyrate, *GBH*, *Liquid Ecstasy*, Gamma Butyrolactone, *GBL*

SOURCE: GHB is mostly manufactured and distributed illicitly. UK sources may originate in Europe or further afield. GBL is currently found in a number of products including stain and glue removers, and industrial solvents. Most of the GBL currently used in the UK is sold in this form.

GBL is a pro-drug and converts in the body to GHB. Alternatively it is converted to GHB by processing with Sodium Hydroxide. GBL is also present, in small quantities, in some food and drinks as a natural product. It is present, in low levels, in many wines.

APPEARANCE: GHB is a white crystalline powder. The powder is rarely sold on at a street or club level. Instead the salt is mixed with water to produce a clear liquid sold in small plastic bottles. GBL is typically sold in plastic bottles, sometimes labelled but often unmarked.

COST: Widely variable; large bottles of GBL sell for around £40 for 250ml.

QUALITY: Highly variable; as GHB is illegally manufactured strength can vary widely from brand to brand and batch to batch. Likewise, concentrations of GBL can vary massively.

METHODS OF USE: Swallowed, usually taking a small capful.

EFFECTS: Effects vary greatly according to users and the dose taken. At low doses, the effects are similar to alcohol, making users feel relaxed, chatty, flirtatious and slightly dizzy. With higher doses, users may feel happier, more tactile, but also more drowsy. With still higher doses, users are more likely to feel dizzy, nauseous and risk seizures or blacking out.

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS: There have been fatalities related to the use of GHB but usually where alcohol has been consumed as well. Users run the risk of becoming unconscious; breathing may stop or be prevented by aspirating vomit. Users may enter a coma-like state for several hours.

Regular and frequent use of GHB can lead to physical dependency, with severe withdrawal symptoms akin to those from Alcohol or Benzodiazepines. These could include shakes, tremors, spasms, panic, hallucinations or delusions. While such dependency will not develop with infrequent users, anyone using GHB for a sustained period of time should seek expert drugs advice before discontinuing use abruptly.

LEGAL STATUS: GHB was added to the list of controlled drugs in July 2003. It is a Class C Schedule 4.i drug, making it illegal to produce, possess or supply unless authorised to do so.

A person can be arrested for possession of GHB, though such arrests are not common.

GBL is currently not a controlled drug and so possession and supply are currently not governed by the MDA 1971. It is currently not illegal to possess or supply GBL.

Supply would be governed by the Medicines Act if the GBL were supplied for consumption but, as it is primarily sold as an industrial solvent, it falls outside this legislation.

OTHER INFORMATION: GHB has been used in a variety of medical and non-medical contexts for several decades. It has been used medically for the treatment of insomnia, as an anaesthetic and to relieve symptoms of alcohol withdrawal.

There is also a persisting belief amongst body-builders that use of GHB stimulates release of Human Growth Hormone (HGH) during sleep and so GHB became popular amongst body builders and was initially classed as a “dietary” supplement.

GHB became increasingly popular in the dance and club scene – somewhat bizarrely as many people found that a night on GHB left them unable to dance or communicate, and all too often left them unconscious. Prior to 2003 GHB was not a controlled drug and it was widely sold in sex shops and on-line. Some commentators linked the increased use of GHB with a downturn in availability of Ecstasy. Some users took GHB with stimulants, others mixed it with alcohol; the results were frequently messy.

GHB was widely considered to be a culprit in Drug Assisted Sexual Assaults (“Date Rapes”). It has proved very hard to establish, with any certainty, the extent to which GHB has genuinely been used as a drink adulterant. Some sources argue that GHBs distinctive strong, salty taste makes it easily detectable as a drink-spiking agent. Further, it has a relatively short, 12 hr detection window making it a hard drug to test for.

GHB was made a controlled drug in 2003, rapidly reducing its availability and use. However, availability of the prodrug GBL was not restricted and use of this compound has become much more widespread.