

GAMMA HYDROXYBUTYRATE (GHB)

Street names

G, GHB, GBL, gamma, fantasy, 4-hydroxybutanoic acid, grievous bodily harm (GBH), liquid ecstasy, liquid E, liquid X, fishes.

What is it?

Gamma hydroxybutyrate or GHB is a central nervous depressant that also naturally occurs in the body. It was originally used in the 1960's as an anaesthetic drug but was abandoned. The illicit form of the drug is generally odourless and has a bitter, salty and/or chemical taste (GBL or 1,4-B which are analogues of GHB). GHB is sold in vials, bottles or sometimes soy sauce 'fishes'.

What does it look like?

Clear or lightly coloured liquid (usually added by supplier/manufacturer to distinguish it from water). GHB can also be sold as a tablet or crystal powder – although this is rare.

How is it usually taken?

GHB is usually mixed with water or sweet/soft drinks and swallowed. It can also be injected or inserted anally (shelved).

Immediate effects

Within 15-20 minutes of swallowing GHB people will begin to feel its effects. The peak effects occur 30-60 minutes after ingesting and can last between 1.5-3 hours (or even longer if larger doses have been used).

Depending on dose people will experience the following:

- Feelings of euphoria and increased wellbeing
- Increased libido
- Drowsiness
- Nausea and vomiting
- Visual disturbances
- Agitation and dizziness
- Coordination
- Respiratory depression and distress

The desired effects of GHB are reported to be similar to alcohol intoxication.

Long-term effects

Little is known about the long-term effects of GHB due to the short time it has been used. Research has found that people can get tolerant to the effects of GHB and also experience withdrawal and dependence.

Mixing GHB with other drugs

Mixing GHB with other central nervous system depressant drugs such as alcohol or benzodiazepines is particularly dangerous because it increases the depressant effects of each drug, which can lead to respiratory distress, overdose and death.

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Other things to consider

- Gamma-butyrolactone (GBL) and 1,4-butanediol (1,4-B) are closely related to GHB and are sometimes sold as GHB. When these drugs ingested, they convert to GHB in the body and provide the same (albeit slightly delayed) effect. The main way to distinguish the difference is that GHB tastes bitter and salty whereas GBL/1,4-B has more of a chemical flavour.
- One of the main dangers with GHB is overdose – this is because the chemical composition of the drug is highly variable across batches. The difference between a 'high' and an overdose can be very small.
- Sometimes people can experience a 'g-nap' when they have had too much GHB. One of the main risks associated with g-naps is that the person drops their head forward and may block off their airways stopping the flow of oxygen to their brains which can cause brain damage.
- Some people use GHB to enhance sex. One of the short-term effects of GHB is short-term memory loss which can affect a person's ability to consent to sex.
- The symptoms of a GHB overdose include poor balance and coordination, nausea and vomiting, disorientation and stiffening of muscles. If this occurs, seek medical attention immediately.
- The symptoms of GHB withdrawal are similar to alcohol withdrawal and can include delirium and convulsions.
- Many people believe that GHB is commonly used to spike drinks, however toxicology reports do not support these claims. GHB can have a strong salty taste that is likely to be noticeable when consumed.

Harm reduction advice

- Be aware of your dose and carefully measure it – it is very easy to use too much GHB/GBL.
- If you plan to re-dose, leave at least 2-3 hours between each dose – set an alarm on your phone to help keep track of time.
- Have drug holidays to avoid the risk of drug dependence and withdrawal.
- GHB can build up in your body so be sure to reduce the size of each subsequent dose if re-dosing.
- Try not to mix GHB with any depressant drug as this will greatly increase the risk of an overdose being fatal.
- Avoid using alone or in other situations where help might not be available.
- GHB can make you want to have sex – so make sure it is consensual and safe and use condoms and lubricant.