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Raves and Club Drugs

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Raves and Club Drugs

Shannon C. Miller, MD, CMRO

INTRODUCTION

Youth attendance at rave events and clubs continues to be highly popular. The prevalence of illegal drugs at these events is well known. Up to 70% of attendees may be using illegal drugs.¹ According to one survey, more than 80% of attendees at a “circuit” party had taken illegal drugs that day, with an average of 3 drugs per person.² The term *club drugs* results from the strong association of specific illegal drugs and many dance clubs. Most of these drugs are Schedule I substances under the Controlled Substances Act. Most are fraught with highly dangerous medical complications—including death—in addition to addiction. Dehydration due to the combination of psychomotor stimulants, relentless dancing, and poor fluid intake has been implicated in a variety of club- and rave-related deaths. Moreover, the variety and number of over-the-counter and legal drugs present at raves and clubs are significant. Attempts by intoxicated, exhausted, sleep-deprived attendees to operate motor vehicles home during the early morning rush hour can prove deadly. Awareness of these drugs and related issues is of particular importance to the practice of specific medical specialties, including pediatrics, psychiatry, family practice, emergency medicine, addiction medicine, and addiction psychiatry, as well as general practice.

THE CLUB SCENE AND THE ANATOMY OF A RAVE

A “club” may be defined as any dance establishment, whereas a “rave” refers to the actual activity therein. Raves, however, may occur anywhere. Raves are organized social events that usually include music and dancing and are often organized around a specific theme (eg, environmental concerns, spiritual concerns) for a specific audience—usually teens and young adults. The culture behind this movement has its roots in rebellious youth subculture.³ From the Beatniks and the Greasers of the 1950s, the Hippies of the 1960s, and the Punkers of the 1980s, youth has long had an interest in establishing a set of behaviors different from those of society.

Most often this is reflected in the adoption of unique, intense behaviors (eg, “free love,” body piercing) and is expressed in unique styles of clothing and music. At times, this has also included illegal drug use.

Club music has its roots in the Punk Rock sounds of the 1980s, characterized by thrashing electronic sounds and stage antics. This evolved into New Wave music (a cleaner, more technologically sophisticated sound). As home music synthesizing equipment became less expensive, emphasis shifted from a band consisting of musicians to a new music creator, the DJ. DJs typically produced music without lyrics. But without lyrics, a lead singer, nor any musicians or stage antics, the music was not marketable and thus was found primarily “underground”—thus, the appeal to the youth counterculture.

This “techno” sound became more focused within circuit parties—dance parties for gay men. The popular use of cocaine at these events in the 1980s was replaced by MDMA, or *ecstasy*, which provided a more desired blend of energy (important for extended dancing and staying out late) together with an empathic or “loving” feeling. The development of the Roland TB-303 synthesizer allowed DJs to create music inexpensively. In addition, this synthesizer had a unique ability to offer long music sequences featuring drum machines with a fast tempo (140–200 beats per minute)—highly desired by those using stimulants such as MDMA.

In 1988, Great Britain experienced the “Second Summer of Love” (as termed by British musical journalists). MDMA had just arrived from the United States. Because MDMA was sold as tablets with logos imprinted by the drug’s makers, they resembled pharmaceutical grade prescription medications, thus appearing “safe” (**Figure 1**). MDMA was devoid of the stigmata of illegal drugs of abuse, such as being used intravenously, carrying the risk of HIV infection, or lacking standardized packaging or a standardized form. MDMA’s pleasant psychotropic effects caused it to be viewed as a “nice” drug, and the “happy face” symbol became the icon of

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