**What is Ecstasy?**

Ecstasy, or methylene-dioxymethyl amphetamine (MDMA), is an illegal drug that acts as both a stimulant and hallucinogen, producing an energizing effect, as well as distortions in time and perception and enhanced enjoyment from tactile experiences. Typically, MDMA is taken orally, usually in a tablet or capsule, and its effects last approximately 3 to 6 hours.

The average reported dose is one to two tablets, with each tablet typically containing between 60 and 120 milligrams of MDMA. It is not uncommon for users to take a second dose of the drug as the effects of the first dose begin to fade.

MDMA can affect the brain by altering the activity of chemical messengers, or neurotransmitters, which enable nerve cells in many regions of the brain to communicate with one another. Research in animals has shown that MDMA in moderate to high doses can be toxic to nerve cells that contain serotonin and can cause long-lasting damage to them.

Further, MDMA can interfere with the body’s ability to control its temperature, which has on rare occasions led to severe medical consequences, including death. Also, MDMA causes the release of another neurotransmitter, norepinephrine, which is likely what causes the increase in heart rate and blood pressure that often accompanies MDMA use.

Although MDMA is known universally among users as Ecstasy, researchers have determined that many Ecstasy tablets contain not only MDMA but a number of other drugs or drug combinations that can be harmful as well. Adulterants found in MDMA tablets purchased on the street include methamphetamine, caffeine, the over the counter cough suppressant dextromethorphan, the diet drug ephedrine, and cocaine.

Also, as with many other drugs of abuse, MDMA is rarely used alone. It is not uncommon for users to mix MDMA with other substances, such as alcohol and marijuana.

**History of MDMA**

MDMA was developed in Germany in the early 1900s as a parent compound to be used to synthesize other pharmaceuticals. During the 1970s in the United States some psychiatrists began using MDMA as a psychotherapeutic tool despite the fact that the drug had never undergone formal clinical trials nor received approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use in people.

In fact, it was only in late 2000 that the FDA approved the first small clinical trial for MDMA that will determine if the drug can be used safely under carefully monitored conditions to treat post-traumatic stress disorder. Nevertheless, the drug gained a small following among psychiatrists in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with some even calling it "penicillin for the soul" because it was perceived to enhance communication in patient sessions and reportedly allowed users to achieve insights about their problems.

It was also during this time that MDMA first started becoming available on the street. In 1985, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency banned the drug, placing it on the list of Schedule I drugs with no proven therapeutic value.