

Date Rape Drugs & Sexual Assault

In recent years the media has widely publicized incidences of sexual assault where the perpetrators have used drugs to debilitate the persons they assault. While this is not a new phenomenon, drug-facilitated sexual assault has only recently become widely recognized. Yet the most common and prevalent date rape drug, alcohol, is still not readily recognized as a tool used by perpetrators. In fact, almost half of the sexual assaults that young adults experience take place under the influence of alcohol¹.

The use of date rape drugs clearly illustrates how sexual assaults are planned and premeditated events. Perpetrators of sexual assault use date rape drugs as a method to incapacitate their victim and to ensure that she/he will not be able to resist the assault. In addition, using date rape drugs ensures that the survivor will not recall enough details about the assault to prosecute the perpetrator. Still, it is important to understand that if an individual is drugged unknowingly, or willingly consumes alcohol or drugs and then is sexually assaulted, the perpetrator of the assault is the only person who is to blame. It is not the survivor's fault. The Criminal Code of Canada (Section 271.3) legally outlines the perpetrator's blame by stating that consent for sexual activity cannot be obtained when an individual is impaired by drugs or alcohol.

Types of Date Rape Drugs

Alcohol

Alcohol is a common depressant that slows the activity of the central nervous system. It lowers inhibitions, disturbs motor skills, and a large intake of alcohol can even result in a temporary coma; its effects subside fairly slowly, as it takes the human body one hour to process each alcoholic drink consumed.

Alcohol is by far the most prevalent date rape drug and is easy to use because it is legal and socially accepted. In some cases, perpetrators take advantage of the fact that an individual is drinking heavily. In other cases, the perpetrator is actively involved in ensuring that an individual gets drunk by buying drinks, encouraging her/him to drink, and pouring drinks with more alcohol than usual. In either case, when an individual is drunk she/he is legally unable to consent to sexual activity. There is a misconception among some people that accepting drinks from someone indicates interest in sexual activity. Yet, consenting to having a drink is not consenting to sexual activity it is solely consenting to having a drink.

¹ This has been found in many studies, including The Survey of Unwanted Sexual Experiences Among University of Alberta Students, 2001.

Unlike other date rape drugs, alcohol is also often used by the perpetrator on him/herself. By using alcohol, the perpetrator lowers his/her own inhibitions and attempts to excuse himself/herself for committing the sexual assault. In other words, perpetrators use alcohol purposefully to aid them in committing the sexual assault.

Rohypnol

The most well known date rape drug is flunitrazepam, which is more commonly known as “rohypnol,” “roofies,” or “the forget pill.” Flunitrazepam is legally sold in Europe and Latin America as a sleep aid, but is illegal in North America.

Rohypnol’s effects vary depending on the dosage that one is given, but they range from sedation to stage four coma (rohypnol is ten times more potent than valium). After consuming the drug, it takes 20 - 30 minutes before its sedative effects begin, and the effects can last from 8 - 24 hours. As well as being a strong sedative, rohypnol also causes short-term memory loss. Together these properties make rohypnol a dangerous date rape drug, and when it is mixed with alcohol it is even more dangerous because it can lead to severe intoxication and even death.

GHB

Gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB) is a fairly common drug with a variety of side effects, and thus has a wide range of users. For instance, some weightlifters use it for its muscle growth enhancing properties, some recreational drug users take it in combination with other drugs, and some individuals use it for its prosexual side effects (such as disinhibition and heightened sense of touch). Its is inexpensive and easy to synthesize; the components that make up GHB can be purchased in health food stores or it can be purchased over the internet.

GHB takes 15 - 20 minutes to begin having sedative effects that can last a couple of hours. High dosages can have negative side effects such as vomiting, respiratory depression, and even death. GHB is especially dangerous when mixed with alcohol.

Recently GHB has become associated with raves. Other drugs associated with raves, such as ecstasy, have similar effects as GHB and have also been used as date rape drugs. When testing for GHB it is important to remember that it may be undetectable only 12 hours after ingestion.

Ketamine

Ketamine is an anesthetic used primarily with animals that has both pain relief and memory loss effects. When given to humans it usually results in a state of intoxication that renders the individual temporarily unable to move, feel pain, or remember what took place while intoxicated by the drug. Usually this state lasts

only 30 to 60 minutes, and it can be accompanied by hallucinatory experiences similar to those created by LSD or PCP.

Detection of Date Rape Drugs

All date rape drugs are processed by the body quickly and are thus difficult to detect. When testing for date rape drugs the closer to the time of the drugging at possible is best, as after 72 hours detection will be impossible. It also varies depending on the drug used; for example GHB can be untraceable in only 12 hours whereas rohypnol will be traceable up to 72 hours. Date rape drugs are detected through a urine sample test, but rohypnol can also be detected through a blood test that screens for Valium (as they are similar compounds).

Drug Facilitated Sexual Assault

In a recent survey conducted at the University of Alberta, it was found that over half (54.2%) of the sexual assaults experienced by students took place when the survivor of the assault was under the influence of alcohol or drugs (LoVerso, 2000). In addition, research shows that this is not a new phenomenon, and has been a reality for university students for many years (Koss, 1988).

In a drug-facilitated sexual assault, the perpetrator uses alcohol or drugs as a method to decrease resistance from the person they are assaulting. The alcohol and drugs used may have been taken voluntarily by the survivor, or forced upon her/him by the perpetrator. The most common drug used in this type of assault is alcohol.

Depending on the drug that was used, some survivors of drug-facilitated sexual assault may have little memory of what took place or no memory of being sexually assaulted at all. In the cases where there is no memory of the assault, the individual may still experience symptoms related to being sexually assaulted such as flashbacks and sudden memories. Like any survivor, the survivor of a drug-facilitated sexual assault will need time to undergo the healing process, and it may be even more difficult for her/him due to the lack of understanding about what they are experiencing. Having symptoms of a sexual assault or having blacked out, and yet not recalling what happened, can lead to the survivor feeling as though she/he is “going crazy” or can lead others to mistrust what she/he is feeling.

Someone who has experienced a drug-facilitated sexual assault is likely to feel very confused and disoriented. This confusion may be accentuated by the continued effects of the drugs that may make it difficult to think clearly. The loss of memory experienced by survivors of drug-facilitated sexual assault can make recovery more difficult because part of the recovery process involves remembering and working through the memories, acknowledging that what

happened was a sexual assault, and experiencing feelings around the sexual assault such as anger, regret and acceptance.

Because drugs or alcohol are involved in these assaults, survivors are even more likely to blame themselves for what happened. Survivors feel that they were at fault because they got intoxicated and “let themselves get out of control.” Yet even if the alcohol or drugs were taken willingly, consent cannot be granted when intoxicated. In addition, consenting to consuming alcohol or drugs is NOT consenting to sex.

Consent

There is a common idea that accepting drinks or a dinner from someone indicates an interest in engaging in sexual activity with that person. Yet this idea is not congruent with what the person accepting the drink feels, or how the Criminal Code of Canada outlines how consent may be granted.

Under the Criminal Code of Canada, “Consent is defined as a voluntary agreement of the complainant to engage in the sexual activity in question” (Section 273.1).

Consent is deemed **not** to be obtained if:

- It is given by someone else
- The person is unconscious, drunk, stoned, or sleeping
- It is an abuse of power, trust, or authority
- The person does not say yes, says no, or through other words of behavior implies no
- The person changes his or her mind.

Experiencing Date Rape Drugs

Most survivors of sexual assault who were given a date rape drug report suddenly feeling strangely lightheaded and intoxicated with visual and/or physical impairment and then waking up drowsy, confused, weak, and/or with impaired motor skills, and with almost no recollection of what took place since feeling lightheaded. Often when they can remember parts of the assault they recall feeling paralyzed, powerless, and/or dissociated from their body, or they only remember scattered pieces of what occurred. In some cases, the survivors of drug-facilitated sexual assault have no memory at all of what took place. When alcohol is the only date rape drug used, survivors may feel that they got drunker than they had planned to that night, or they have some memories of having sexual activity that she/he was not planning on having.

Indications of a Sexual Assault

In drug-facilitated sexual assaults it is possible that the survivor has little or no recollection of a sexual assault. The following are some indications that a drug-facilitated sexual assault may have occurred:

- Physical Indications
 - Soreness in the genital or anal areas
 - Marks or bruises on the skin
 - Abnormal discharge and/or bleeding

- Other Indications
 - Loss of memory for a whole part of an evening or day
 - Waking up in different surroundings and not knowing how you got there
 - Waking up with clothes missing or put on differently
 - A sense that something wrong happened or that something is “not right”

Medical Attention

If a drug-facilitated sexual assault takes place or is suspected, it is important to get some form of medical attention to test for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and/or pregnancy, and if possible to ascertain if a drug was used. A physical exam after a sexual assault can be very difficult, but fortunately in Edmonton we have services such as SART, the STD Clinic and the University Health Centre that make the process more comfortable.

SART (The Sexual Assault Response Team) consists of a team of nurses who examine and treat all survivors who report being sexually assaulted to a hospital emergency room. The nurses have been specially trained to be sensitive to the needs of survivors. SART is available 24 hours a day 7 days a week, and they will examine anyone over the age of 14 (if the survivor is under the age of fourteen, the child abuse team will do the examination.) The SART nurses perform physical examinations to look for and treat injuries after a sexual assault, and can collect evidence for future legal prosecution of the sexual assault if the survivor chooses to pursue this (such as a urine sample to test for the presence of date rape drugs). If the survivor wants physical evidence to be recorded through the use of the rape kit, the police will be phoned. Yet, this does not mean that the survivor has to report to the police. The police will be there to take the completed rape kit from the SART nurse to ensure continuity of the evidence, and talk with the survivor if she/he is willing. To see a SART nurse one must go to a hospital emergency room in Edmonton and surrounding areas.

If the survivor is concerned with the possibility of having contracted an STI and does not want to go to the emergency room, the STD Clinic in Edmonton provides free, confidential and anonymous testing. The Clinic is located at 11111 Jasper Avenue and they are open Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.

They also take evening appointments, and these can be made by phoning 413-5156.

The University of Alberta Health Services also provides confidential testing for pregnancy, STIs, and HIV/AIDS, as well as medical examinations. To use the University Health Services (UHS) you must be a staff or student at the University of Alberta, and upon arrival you must present your One Card and proof of health care insurance coverage. UHS is open Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. and they take patients on a walk-in basis.

Even if someone has been drugged, but not sexually assaulted, it is still recommended to seek medical attention for her/his own physical safety. The substance itself could be potentially very harmful to her/his health. If you are with a friend or loved one who you suspect has been drugged, ensure that you stay with the person to ensure her/his safety. Individuals who have been drugged often have the same emotions surrounding the experience as a sexual assault survivor may have—loss of control, fears about what they do not remember, loss of trust, feelings of going crazy, etc. It is important that these individuals receive the same support that a sexual assault survivor would.

Date Rape Drug Myths

Much of the information about date rape drugs emphasizes ways in which women can stay safe from these drugs. Examples include only accepting drinks from people you know, especially at a bar, keeping an eye on your drink at all times, and not drinking from wide mouthed containers. These statements are misleading for several reasons. Firstly, date rape drugs can be used in many locations, not just in bars. The Sexual Assault Centre has seen cases where date rape drugs were used at house parties, restaurants, and while camping. Also, it is more common for a friend, partner, or acquaintance than a stranger to use the drugs on someone. In addition, these statements are almost always directed at women, but men can also experience drug-facilitated sexual assault. Most importantly, these statements do not place the responsibility for stopping this crime on the individuals who are using the drug against someone, but on those who may be given the drug. This results in survivors' feeling as though they were responsible for their sexual assault, but the only person who should be held responsible is the perpetrator of the assault.