

A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

University of Maryland at College Park

Drug Abuse Alert: Rohypnol

A panel at NIDA's Community Epidemiology Work Group (CEWG) meeting on June 16, 1995 addressed the rapidly spreading abuse of the sedative-hypnotic Rohypnol among adolescents and young adults in Florida and Texas. Rohypnol (pronounced row-hip-nole) is not legally available in the United States, even for medicinal purposes, but it is an approved medicine in most other parts of the world, prescribed mainly for the short-term treatment of sleep disorders. Rohypnol (the brand name of flunitrazepam) is a benzodiazepine like the tranquilizer diazepam (Valium), yet is 10 times more potent. The drug produces sedative effects, including amnesia, muscle relaxation, and the slowing of psychomotor performance. Sedation occurs 20 to 30 minutes after administration of a 2-mg tablet and lasts for approximately 8 hours.

Illicit use of Rohypnol originated in Europe in the 1970s and has increased worldwide since then. However, the substance did not appear in the United States until the early 1990s. In 1992, a South Florida drug hotline began receiving calls reporting occasional to chronic abuse of the drug. Around the same time, the drug appeared in Texas as well. Today, use of Rohypnol is one of the fastest growing drug problems in both areas. In addition, the drug appears to be spreading across the United States. As of April 1995, the Drug Enforcement Administration had documented over 1,000 cases of Rohypnol possession across 13 states, including one case in **Maryland**. In addition, the most recent *Pulse Check* cites Rohypnol among the emerging drugs of the Spring 1995 survey.

Rohypnol use by youths of all socioeconomic status has been reported. The inexpensive cost, ranging from \$2 to \$3 per pill, attracts young users. High school students report use of the drug as a cheap drunk and as a cure for alcohol hangovers. Typically, however, Rohypnol is used along with alcohol and other drugs. College students using Rohypnol report mixing it with beer to enhance the feeling of drunkenness. It has also been reported to be used in combination with marijuana and cocaine, as well as heroin. Street names for Rohypnol include rophies, ropies, ruffies, roofies, roche, R-2, mexican valium, rib, and rope.

The use of Rohypnol itself is dangerous, leading to physical and psychic dependence, which increases with dose and duration of use. However, there are other dangers linked to the use of this substance. Rohypnol is typically sold in its original bubble packaging, conveying a sense of legality and security in its use. The perceived safety of the drug, along with the trend of use in combination with other substances, creates the possibility of Rohypnol becoming a gateway to harder drugs. An equally serious danger is the reported use of Rohypnol as a "date rape" drug of choice. Sources in both Florida and Texas report that the drug is given to females without their consent in order to produce disinhibition. While this specific use may not be pervasive, it is cause for concern.

The recent appearance of Rohypnol in the United States, coupled with the lack of an inexpensive urine test for the substance, has delayed the collection of research information. Future research should concentrate on the distribution pattern of the drug, medical descriptions of the epidemic, and effective prevention and treatment procedures.

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from data from Jim Hall and Jane C. Maxwell, Community Drug Epidemiology Work Group (CEWG) Memorandum, May 2, 1995. For more information on Rohypnol, contact Jim Hall at (305) 757-2566 or Jane Maxwell at (512) 867-8829.