



Educate Yourself

FACTS about DRUGS: EPHEDRINE

WHAT IS IT?

Ephedrine is a drug derived from Ephedra bushes found in deserts throughout the world. Chemically similar to adrenaline, it is a natural stimulant that has been used for centuries — often under its traditional Chinese name, Ma huang. Ephedrine is often found in herbal substitutes for MDMA, or “Ecstasy,” as well as in energizers, nutritional supplements, and dietary teas. In its pure form, it resembles a white powder, but more often, it is sold as a tablet, capsule, or as loose plant material (Do It Now Foundation 2002 and Weil and Rosen 2004).

SLANG

Herbal Fuel, Chi Powder, Zest. A related form of the drug, known as pseudoephedrine, is a common ingredient in over-the-counter and prescription cold and allergy products.

AVAILABILITY AND USE

Until recently, more than 100 supplements contained ephedrine, which some users refer to as “legal speed.” Sold over-the-counter, the drug was used as a remedy for respiratory problems related to colds, allergies, and asthma, as well as a weight-loss aid. In recent months, sensational publicity highlighting the potential dangers of ephedrine prompted Congress to ban the drug. Today, it can only be found in Chinese herbal medical formulas (Weil and Rosen 2004).

RATES OF USE

The typical dosage for adults is 30-60 milligrams taken orally, three to four times per day, in the form of a tablet (The Vaults of Erowid 2000).

THE HIGH

Ephedrine triggers a mild burst of energy and can cause sharp increases in both blood pressure and heart rate. In addition to its stimulant effects, ephedrine also relaxes bronchial muscles and opens airways (Do It Now Foundation 2002).

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THE RISKS

Ephedrine is well known for its effectiveness in increasing energy, but chronic users have described the potential for dependency. Compared with amphetamines, it can produce more anxiety and less euphoria (Weil and Rosen 2004).

Since 1994, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has received more than 800 reports of unpleasant effects associated with use of products containing ephedrine. These serious adverse effects include hypertension (elevated blood pressure), palpitations (rapid heart rate), neuropathy (nerve damage), myopathy (muscle injury), psychosis, stroke, memory loss, heart rate irregularities, insomnia, nervousness, tremors, seizures, heart attacks, and death (Ephedrine Legal Advice 2004).

Users who are sensitive to ephedrine, or who take high doses, may experience serious health risks, including abnormally high blood pressure, breathing difficulties, and rapid, irregular heartbeat. Feelings of confusion and paranoia are also possible. An amphetamine-like psychosis has also been linked to chronic use of high-dose levels of the drug (The Vaults of Erowid 2000).

SIGNS OF USE

Someone using ephedrine will demonstrate gentle bursts of energy. Stimulant effects, such as fof alertness and reduced appetite, are also signs of use. Some other side effects to be aware of are increased body temperature, sweating, and cotton/dry mouth.

RECOMMENDED READING

Weil, Andrew and Winifred Rosen. 2004. *From Chocolate to Morphine, Everything You Need to Know About Mind-Altering Drugs*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company. ISBN: 0618483799.

REFERENCES

Do It Now Foundation Staff. 2002. *Ephedrine: Fast Facts*. Do It Now Foundation. <http://www.doitnow.org/pages/528.html> (accessed March 7, 2004).

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ABOUT SAFETY FIRST

Safety First, a project of the Drug Policy Alliance, is dedicated to providing parents of adolescents with honest, science-based information about drugs and drug education. For more information, visit www.safety1st.org.

Safety First
2233 Lombard Street
San Francisco, CA 94123
T: 415.921.4987
F: 415.921.1912
E: info@safety1st.org
W: www.safety1st.org

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