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Generation X

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generation
Ecstasy’s popularity in Ames is growing - and creating a brand-new type of drug user

Ever since rave culture became a reality, the word Ecstasy is inevitably mentioned in the same breath. Ecstasy, a drug with hallucinogenic properties that costs about $20 or $30 per dose, is a mainstay at many raves. It heightens the user’s sensitivity, which makes it a natural for raves peppered with flashing lights and Glo Sticks. But it’s also a potentially dangerous drug, which is why many ravers are shunning Ecstasy and insisting that raves get back to their music-and-togetherness roots. Talk to some ravers around here, and they’ll let you know raves are more about the musical experience than the chemicals.

But rave culture can’t deny its ties to Ecstasy; the connection has always been there. And as raves are increasing in popularity in America’s Heartland, so is Ecstasy. Local drug agents recently made several high-profile busts in connection with the drug, including charging a Hixon scholar — a recipient of one of Iowa State’s most lauded scholarships for underprivileged students — with selling it.

There’s no question that it’s here. And it’s not just at raves or parties. It’s happening in apartments and dorm rooms across campus, being used by people who could best be described as average, everyday ISU students who are bored with pot and desperately want a new drug.

Like many other trends, it seems Iowa was a little late in catching up with this one.

The average, everyday ISU student

ISU senior in horticulture Norm started smoking pot in high school, and it’s become a daily habit. Now he’s tried X about five times and gives it glowing reviews. He and his friends know the risks — mood swings, memory loss, and brain damage — but they don’t care. X is what they had been waiting for. “It’s hard to explain it,” says Norm, who, like the other ecstasy users, didn’t want his real name in this article. “Overall, it’s a good feeling — two thumbs up.”

It’s that simple for him. When asked why he tried the drug (his first time was on last year’s Super Bowl Sunday, usually a time for a different kind of celebration), he says of himself and his friends collectively: “We felt it was time.”
"When it kicks in, you just let loose. You talk to everyone. You're very, very talkative, and you like human interaction. Anything would probably amuse you."

ISU student Norm and an X user

Addis Jake, another X user and ISU junior in exercise and sport science, "We just wanted to do it."

When asked what it's like, Jake and Norm use phrases like "endless energy." "When it kicks in, you just let loose," Norm says. "You talk to everyone. You're very, very talkative, and you like human interaction. Anything amuses you. You're very flirty. You want to be touched, but it's not in a sexual manner."

Norm insists he's never experienced any negative side effects from doing X. "There's no come down, no withdrawal, just feel tired. You did so much activity and don't even realize it."

However, Brent, an ISU junior in English who's used the drug several times, says he's felt louzy after taking X. "It's kinda like that feeling you get when you go drink, go to bed at 4, and wake up at 8 when you're still kinda drunk. But it lasts, like, all day." He also says he's had hallucinations and likens X to an LSD experience. "One of the clearest things I remember from this summer when I was on it was lying down in this guy's yard and looking up at a tree and I could see, like, every little vein in the leaves on the trees. Everything's amplified like that."

If techno is the new rock, then X users often sound like post-modern hippies. To be clear, though, none of these three has ever set foot inside a rave. When they do Ecstasy, it's at small houses and apartment parties. And they also say they've had no problem finding the designer drug, even in a city with less than 50,000 people. Norm says it's easy to track down. "People come around and say Ecstasy is in town. It basically falls in your lap. You get lucky, unless you know people. You do it, and your friends usually are doing the same things."

Trying to fight the drug

ISU Department of Public Safety Capt. John Tinker is one of the officers who's trying to find a way to keep X from just falling in ISU students' laps. He's the manager of the Central Iowa Drug Task Force, which recently confiscated between 300 to 400 hits of Ecstasy. Tinker knew it would only be a matter of time before Ecstasy made its way to Iowa. "It's like a lot of drugs. They start on the coasts, like in California and New Jersey, and make their way into the Midwest. I think that's the case with Ecstasy. Over time, it has migrated into the Midwest," he says.

Of course, Iowa's not a stranger when it comes to drugs. We've gotten nationwide attention for the meth problem. Meth's key ingredient, anhydrous ammonia, is readily available. The drug task force put a lot of hours into fighting meth, but Tinker says that's not the reason X became so big, so fast. "I don't think it had anything to do with it. [Ecstasy] is a craze right now, and [meth] is still a major problem," he says.

Ecstasy's popularity bothers Tinker. He points out that batches of the drug that were mixed with other chemicals recently killed several students in Illinois. Ames Police Detective Howard Snider, who's also a member of the task force, says the reason X appeals to college students is because of its reputation, which was well known even before it started showing up in Story County.

"A lot of people want to call it a safe drug — they don't feel immediate side effects. [But] a lot of it is made in clandestine labs in Europe, and a lot of things go into [Ecstasy tablets] that we don't know about. Nothing that you're buying off the street is safe. You never know what you're getting," he says.

By the way, people caught with Ecstasy face up to one year in prison. Distributing Ecstasy is a felony with a maximum of 10 years in prison.

What it does to you

It's easy to say a drug isn't healthy. We've all had DARE education at some time in our life. And when a drug's real name is methylenedioxyamphetamine, you can assume that it's not exactly a protein shake. But what exactly can X do to your body, to your mind? Is it as dangerous as the cops assert?

ISU psychology professor Richard Hughes says yes. He reaches a class called "Drugs and Behavior" and says the reality is that X is very dangerous. "When it's taken at raves, body temperature can go up and create some nasty problems," he says. These problems can include dehydration, exhaustion, and in extreme cases, death.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, X is like the stimulant amphetamine and the hallucinogen mescaline, so it can cause both stimulant and psychedelic effects. The short-term effects — increased heart rate and blood pressure, and increased alertness — last anywhere from three to six hours.

The long-term effects are just as frightening. Hughes says. Weeks after use, depression, confusion, sleep problems, anxiety, and paranoia can continue. But this is mostly an educated guess because X can't be tested on humans. "With high doses over a long duration, nobody knows what it does in humans," Hughes explains. "There are ethical problems with using humans because it's neurotoxic." In fact, X began in the early 1960s as an appetite suppressant, but it wasn't used on people.

So while X may have a certain mystique, its actual effects on an individual are impossible to guess. "It's like playing roulette when dealing with abusable drugs. Some are very sensitive; some are not," Hughes says. "Most are right in the middle. You can't say categorically what will happen."

It's here to stay

The X users interviewed for this article are aware that they could be getting bad drugs, but they say that won't deter them from occasionally doing Ecstasy. It's probably because of that belief, that feeling of invincibility — and also enthusiasm toward X — that it may remain a drug of choice for ravers and non-ravers alike. Snider says he doesn't see the drug's popularity decreasing in the near future. "Every time we get one person, there are two more to take his place," Snider says. "All we can do is general enforcement. We can't stem the flow of it — it's not gonna happen. It's here, and I don't think it's going away."

Tinker's view is equally bleak. "I don't think we have the problems with it that they have on the coasts, but if society doesn't get a grip on it, we can expect to have severe problems associated with it."

But as for Norm, Jake, and Brent, the feeling that comes with X. at this time at least, outweighs negative repercussions. So Norm and Jake will sit on a crusty couch in their apartment, with Super Mario blaring in the background while a 2-foot bong sits in the middle of the room like a shrine, and they'll enjoy the energy as they suffer the risks.

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