

MDMA, commonly known as Ecstasy (pill form) or Molly (considered by some to be a more pure, powder or crystal form), has become almost synonymous with the rising popularity of the electronic dance music industry, which *Billboard* reported to be worth more than \$6 billion. Concertgoers and others use the drug to feel euphoric and more connected to the music.

But as the use of the drug has become more common, so have injuries and even deaths related to its use, as the substance is often laced with harmful chemicals.

The last day of the 2013 Electric Zoo music festival in New York was cancelled after two concertgoers died from using Molly. An honors student at UVA died after using Molly at a concert in September 2013. Last October, 16 individuals were hospitalized for possible Molly use at a Skrillex concert in Chicago. And in late February, nearly a dozen students from Wesleyan University were hospitalized after using the drug.

While MDMA—shorthand for 3,4-methylenedioxy-methylamphetamine—is synonymous with what users typically call Ecstasy, researchers at the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) have “determined that many Ecstasy tablets contain not only MDMA but also a number of other drugs or drug combinations that can be harmful.” As *The New York Times* explains, “Despite promises of greater purity and potency, Molly, as its popularity had grown, is now thought to be as contaminated as Ecstasy once was.”

“One of the major risks of recreational MDMA use is buying an adulterated substance. It’s often hard to tell, or near impossible to know what is being sold on the streets,” says Irina Alexander, an associate at the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), a nonprofit research

and NU students are no exception.

For McCormick junior Daniel\*, his first experience with MDMA came in a fairly typical setting: a concert in downtown Chicago.

“I had no idea what to expect,” he says. “I had looked into being safe, but I had heard

ing, dancing, having great deep conversations, and a few days after there were lingering positive effects.”

Similarly, Weinberg senior Sarah\* first encountered Molly at the annual electronic music festival Electric Forest in Michigan.

“I found a heightened level of empathy and affection that can be really hard to achieve otherwise,” she says.

Though some users report a tie between MDMA and the user’s enjoyment of concerts, both Daniel and Sarah, along with McCormick junior Alex\*, say they use the drug for other reasons as well.

Alex, who had battled with mental health issues prior to using Molly, notes the drug’s ability to inspire a renewed sense of self-confidence while helping him discover his potential to connect with others.

“Before MDMA, I had very low self-esteem and had been kinda struggling with depression and anxiety issues,” he says. “But after it, I realized I don’t need to be on a drug to have a deep conversation with someone. I don’t need to wait around for someone to come get to know me. I can do that myself.”

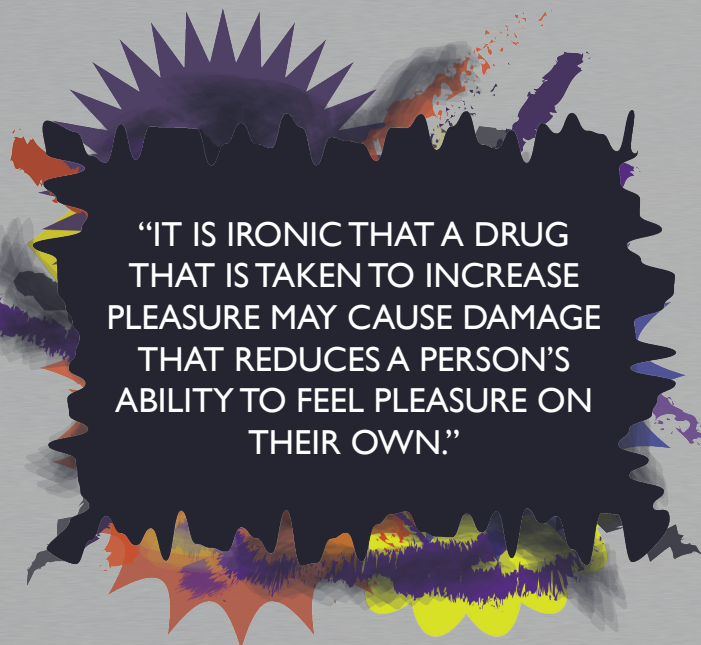
Some researchers recognize the drug’s possible benefits, and they advocate for legalizing MDMA for clinical use in certain circumstances.

“Through clinical trials, we’ve seen that MDMA, combined with therapy, can help treat people who have been exposed to various types of trauma and suffer from PTSD,” Alexander says of the work done at MAPS. “In the near future,

no stories [about the dangers and] had no in-depth conversations with anyone about it.”

After popping the capsule of Molly at dinner before the concert, Daniel didn’t notice any immediate effects for the first several hours of the show. But while overlooking the crowd just before the main act, he and his friends felt a little off.

“It was nothing ridiculous or overpowering, but suddenly it couldn’t have been a more perfect experience,” Daniel says. “We were glowing, smil-

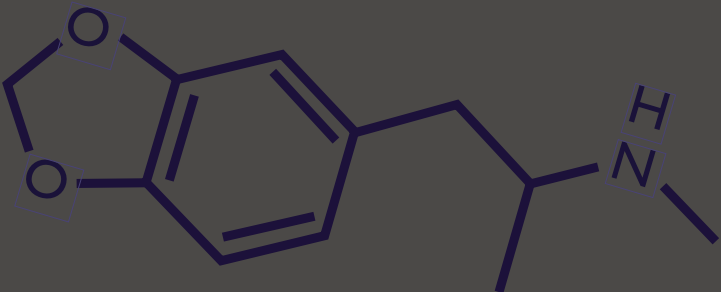


organization in Santa Cruz, California, that seeks to legalize psychedelics for clinical use.

In a 30-year longitudinal study for *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, researchers found an overall decrease in the proportion of college students who reported use of illicit drugs from its peak in 1978, “with the striking exception of MDMA or ‘Ecstasy.’”

While MDMA is not a new drug, research backs the media’s suspicions about its rising use among college students,

#### MDMA: 3,4-Methylenedioxy-N-Methylamphetamine



#### SUBSTANCES SOMETIMES FOUND IN MDMA

- Amphetamine (speed)
- LSD (acid)
- 2-CB (a hallucinogen, also known as 2,5-dimethoxy-4-bromophenethylamine)
- Ephedrine (used in “herbal ecstasy”)
- Ketamine (a type of anaesthetic)
- Aspirin, and other over-the-counter or prescribed medications

Illustrations by Hanna Bolaños

we’re starting a clinical trial featuring cancer patients to see if MDMA can help with end-of-life anxiety.”

However, MDMA is still an illegal substance, and not everyone has positive views about its use.

Concerns remain because of the drug’s possible fatal consequences. From 2005 to 2011, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported a 128 percent increase in ecstasy-related emergency room visits among patients younger than 21.

Special Agent Owen Putman of the Drug Enforcement Administration’s Chicago Division says MDMA can cause unwanted psychological effects like depression. Further risks that users may face, he says, are similar to those of other stimulant drugs, such as cocaine and amphetamines. He adds, “High doses of MDMA can interfere with the ability to regulate body temperature, resulting in a sharp increase in body temperature [hyperthermia] leading to liver, kidney and cardiovascular failure.”

Not only do MDMA users run the risk of these negative physical consequences, they also put themselves in danger of psychological repercussions. Though the drug can allow users to feel immense pleasure and euphoria, too much of it can inhibit a user’s body from being able to produce these pleasurable feelings on its own. It can destabilize the brain’s levels of serotonin—a chemical that helps regulate mood, aggression, sexual activity, sleep and sensitivity to pain.

“It is ironic that a drug that is taken to increase pleasure may cause damage that reduces a person’s ability to feel pleasure on their own,” Putman says.

But the biggest risk seems to be the harmful substances sometimes added to Molly, ironically making the supposedly pure form of ecstasy into a deadly concoction of additives. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that such additives include cough suppressants, cocaine, methamphetamines, ketamine and, more recently, synthetic cathinones, the psychoactive ingredient in bath salts. The NIDA also reports that combining a mixture of these harmful drugs with

other substances such as alcohol or marijuana only increases risk.

Medill sophomore Carl\*, unlike other students, recalls his negative experience when trying the drug.

“Ecstasy literally turned off part of my emotional spectrum, which was a genuinely unsettling experience,” Carl says.

Even with these dangers, the DEA reports that they are seeing a significant increase in the use of synthetic drugs overall. Some resources do exist in an attempt to help MDMA users enjoy their high in the safest way possible. For example, DanceSafe, a San Francisco-based non-profit, teams up with festivals and promoters to provide safety measures like counseling and information on safe usage.

However, some, like Putman, worry these safeguards do not extend far enough, noting that many users don’t fully understand the damage they are doing to their bodies.

“Laboratory analysis confirms that some Molly samples do not actually contain MDMA and in some instances are comprised of other controlled substances,” he says. “Users often don’t know what it is that they’re putting into their body.”

*\*Names have been changed to protect the identity of Northwestern University students.*



Photo by Sean Magner and Jeremy Gaines

Source: ecstasy.org