

Date rape drugs revealed

By RUTH FREEMAN

Liquid Ecstasy, Grievous Bodily Harm, Easy Lay, Special K, Mind Eraser, Party Poppers, Roofies.... Sound like the play-list from an alternative rock station? Don't kid yourself. For thousands of university women across North America, it's more like chemical warfare.

If you've studied chemistry, you might call them gamma hydroxybutyrates, benzodiazepines or flunitrazepam. For the majority of us who are chemistry-challenged, they are known simply as date rape drugs.

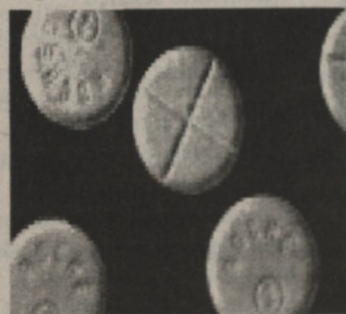
They look innocent enough, sort of like aspirin—small, white tablets that dissolve easily in liquid and are odourless, tasteless, and colourless. Their effects, however, are far from innocent: quick intoxication, impaired judgement and coordination, drowsiness, dizziness, disorientation, hot and cold flashes, and memory loss.

Their characteristics make them the perfect accessory for the modern date rapist. Simply slip one in a girl's Coke, and eight hours later she'll wake up in a strange place with no clothes and no memory of how she got there or with whom. Within 24 hours, the drug will be untraceable in her system. Try prosecuting a rape charge under those circumstances.

A Florida police officer told the *Miami Times*, "it's almost like the perfect crime,

because they don't have to worry about a witness testifying against them. She can't remember what happened, and by the time she's tested for the drug, it's long gone from her system. And don't think these guys aren't figuring that out."

The most common of the date rape drugs is Rohypnol, which first made an appearance in Florida in the early 1990s. Although the drug is illegal in many countries, including Canada and the United States, it is easily available in Mexico where it is used as a surgical anaesthetic and sleeping aid.



Shipments of the drug are smuggled across the US-Mexico border into Texas, and from there distributed around the country and, within the last few years, into Canada. Date rape drugs have been turning up at high schools and on campuses across the country.

Are date rape drugs on the Island?

"There is no reason to believe that they [the drugs] are not here. They are everywhere else," according to Corporal Veinot of the RCMP detachment in Montague. "We

dealt with a sexual assault case recently which may well have been the result of one of these drugs, but there is no way to prove it."

Anne Nicholson, Coordinator of the PEI Rape and Sexual Assault Crisis Centre, says that numerous reports made to the crisis line indicate the presence of date rape drugs.

"A woman may have one drink, yet the effects on her system and memory are so great that you know there is something more at work here than one drink of alcohol," Nicholson said.

Sounds pretty bleak, but there is some good news.

In an impressive show of corporate responsibility, the company that produces Rohypnol (Hoffmann-LaRoche Ltd.) is in the process of adding a blue dye to the tablets to make them easier to identify, and they have removed the 2 milligram dosage from the world-wide market. As well, more and more police departments and hospital emergency rooms are becoming aware of the importance of immediate testing for the presence of date rape drugs in those reporting sexual assaults. This has resulted in an increasing number of successful prosecutions of rapists. Awareness is the best defence.

By now there should be lots of red warning lights flashing in your head, so here are some tips on how to stay safe from date rape drugs.

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What To Do If You Think You've Been Drugged and Sexually Assaulted

1. If you or a friend feel dizzy, confused or have other unexplained symptoms after drinking a beverage, get to a safe place immediately and call a family member, friend, or the police. If you think you have been drugged you should go directly to a hospital emergency room.
2. If you think you have been drugged and sexually assaulted, follow step number 1 and go directly to a hospital emergency room. Call, or ask emergency room personnel to call, the Rape Crisis Centre (566-8999 or 1-800-289-5656) for information and support.
3. Determine whether or not you want to report the incident to the police. If there is any chance you do want to report the incident, you should not shower, bathe, douche, change clothes or straighten up the area until medical and legal evidence has been collected, as these actions will destroy evidence.
4. If you want to report the incident, you can call the police before going to the hospital or after you arrive there. Once at the hospital, request a test as quickly as possible to detect the presence of sedating substances. Chances of getting proof are best when the sample is obtained soon after the substance has been taken. Every hour counts.
5. Try to keep a sample of the beverage for analysis.

Further information about date rape drugs can be obtained at the UPEI Women's Centre. If you have been sexually assaulted and require support, contact the Rape Crisis Centre 24-hour line (566-8999 or 1-800-289-5656) or the Women's Centre (628-4332, Mon-Fri, 8:30-4:00 and 6:00-9:00).