This podcast will contain mention of sexual assault and nonconsensual drugging.

When we’re talking about party drugs, we’re not actually talking about a specific class or type of drug. Rather, we’re talking about the setting these substances are being consumed in and the purpose of their effects. And when talking about this there’s two different kinds: recreational and “date rape drugs” which I will be referring to as sedatives throughout. In the pharmacology world, the common drugs rapists use on their victims such as GHB and Rohypnol, or “roofies” are considered “party drugs” because we often see them deployed in large group settings where the effects go more unnoticed than at intimate gatherings, though it is not unheard of for them to be used in other settings. I’ll be talking more about the nonconsensual use of these drugs later, but it’s important to note that in this category not all of these substances are taken willingly or are known when they are ingested. I am going to hold off on talking about these until the very end, and I will warn when I am about to start discussing them for anyone who wants to tune out at that point.

So let’s talk about the drugs people take themselves at parties. Most popular are Ecstasy, MDMA/Molly, and Ketamine. In Michigan we see “Whip-it’s” or nitrous canisters are somewhat popular, despite its short acting quality. We also see methamphetamine being used moreso than other stimulants, but it’s not unheard of for cocaine, Adderall, or other stimulants to be used to quite literally keep the party going when available. Meth just happens to last the longest and be the most powerful, and cheapest. While festivals and raves are popular venues for use, not everyone who attends uses these drugs, but it’s surprisingly these very venues that are leading the charge in mass harm-reduction practices and large-scale substance testing without risk of prosecution. While not quite commonplace, many festivals have taken the initiative to allow testing operations where anyone can bring the drugs they have on them and get them tested to ensure that what they’re going to take is what they believe it is. This has been able to identify tainted supplies, fake drugs, and prevent overdoses quite successfully when available for free at these sites of use. Over the past few years there have been some headlines if you’ve been paying attention about mass overdoses events, and in almost every case it was due to a supply tainted with fentanyl that one or two dealers would be selling. Sometimes these sellers didn’t even realize the fentanyl was present before the sales, and this has been seen in everything from heroin to cocaine to MDMA. Many of the celebrity overdose deaths in the past several years were from fentanyl tainted drugs, from Prince to Mac Miller, were the result of fentanyl spiked pills they were unaware were tainted. I’ll be speaking more on the fentanyl crisis in the final episode of the season, but it’s impossible to ignore the spread of its presence in nearly every synthesized drug on the black market. Including these party drugs.

MDMA stands for 3-methylenedioxy-methamphetamine, more commonly known as Ecstasy or Molly these days, often doesn’t contain any MDMA at all when tested, with the rare result coming up as pure MDMA, which is another danger entirely. Oftentimes they’re some combination of bath salts, which is just a catch-all term for designer drugs that can pass for epsom salt. Though I’m sure there’s also some unlucky trippers who have ended up with good ole fashioned Dr. Teal’s Bath Salts at one point or another. MDMA though has both stimulant and hallucinogenic effects, seeming to enhance the brain’s response to stimuli by overloading the central nervous system and increasing the activity of dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine in the brain for about 3-6 hours. However, users often experience jaw clenching (or, “gurning”) that can severely damage their teeth and possibly injure themselves. While having friends make sure you’ve got plenty of chewing gum on hand (or a towel if absolutely necessary), it’s not a foolproof method to prevent damage. Since Molly also can produce nausea even at regular doses, you’d better make sure their mouth is clear when they’re about to throw up too. Muscle spasms, chills, sweating, and blurred vision are also effects of the drug (if what you’re taking is indeed MDMA) but the real effects come in the days after use. As a hallucinogen, that overproduction of those happy chemicals for those few hours means you’ll be pretty deficient of those for the next several days. That means feelings of depression, anxiety, irritability, decreased appetite, sleep problems, and decreased pleasure from sex are often experienced as a hangover that can last up to a week or more. It’s important to realize that taking these drugs, even if they’re short acting, can leave you feeling off for quite a while after because of their initial effects on the brain.

So MDMA is technically derived from meth, but doesn’t provide the long-lasting stimulant effects that meth can, particularly when injected as that increases the potency drastically. Instead of prescription stimulants that are fast acting but short lasting, or slow acting and short lasting like Ritalin, methamphetamine can keep you awake for days without really feeling the need to eat, something desirable to both exploited workers and hardcore ravers alike. Since it can be snorted in a powder alongside much of the other substances mentioned in this podcast, it’s used to “bump” people up to last longer. The danger is that methamphetamine is extremely addictive and when interacting with other drugs, including alcohol, it increases the risks of overdose and cardiac arrest. So yes, it can keep you awake for days, if you’re willing to risk malnutrition, heart issues, and stomach issues from not eating.

Then there’s ketamine, an anesthetic used by veterinarians, that despite its effects remains a popular party drug across the world, particularly in Europe though we are now seeing it becoming more popular in the United States. Ketamine is a dissociative, making it great for anesthesia because it distorts the senses and dissociates you from your body and surroundings. We do use it on humans occasionally, and there are currently studies underway of its potential therapeutic effects though no substantial clinical evidence has come from them yet, though it is classified as Schedule III substance because we do use it so often in both human and animal medicine. In essence, it helps the body forget whatever is happening to it, which while useful during surgery, can be extremely dangerous in party or club settings. Ketamine’s effects produce what’s commonly referred to as a “k-hole,” at high doses, where you temporarily can’t interact with the world around you, and is best understood as a state between intoxication and a coma where the body cannot react to stimuli but your eyes can still move, even if your brain isn’t processing that information. People often experience hallucinations in this state, leading some to use higher amounts for that effect and putting themselves more at risk for negative effects. As a respiratory depressant as well, it can dangerously slow your breathing and this risk is increased when taken with alcohol. The post-trip, similar to MDMA, leaves you with a “hangover” that can last a week due to the draining of the brain’s production of dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine that can leave the user in a depressed and anxious state until those chemicals can be replenished in the brain.

So let’s talk about what that actually looks like, especially for these drugs that physically disable you for a period of time. If you’re going to choose to take any drug, make sure you’re in a safe setting, take a limited amount, make sure you don’t mix substances or medications, especially alcohol, and have a trusted, sober person around in case of an emergency. For most substances, it’s not illegal to buy the test kits online in the United States, just extremely illegal to buy the drugs themselves. You can get test kits without ending up on a government watch list to ensure that you’re taking what you think you are, because y’all this fentanyl crisis is no joke. No drugs are safe right now. They’re finding it in absolutely everything from off-brand prescriptions to cocaine to MDMA, and it’s definitely most of the “heroin” that’s being sold these days. If you’re already choosing to spend the money on these drugs, you may as well spend a few extra bucks ordering a test kit and making sure you have NARCAN on hand just in case. In fact, even if you don’t do drugs yourself you should probably look into the free NARCAN training courses in your area and pick up a dose to have on hand. I cannot stress enough how much of a lifesaver NARCAN is. While it only reverses an opiate overdose, and you can still absolutely overdose on most of these drugs on their own, especially Ketamine and MDMA, if someone’s supply is spiked with fentanyl it will reverse that overdose, which we’ve been seeing is primarily the case in overdose deaths these days. Non-opiate users are overdosing on fentanyl without knowing it and without having any NARCAN on hand or anyone to administer it. I’ll speak more on it in our season finale but I highly recommend that anyone, regardless of use, has at least the knowledge on how to administer it.

This is the section where I will be discussing sexual assault and the usage of “date rape drugs” so feel free to pause or skip this section.

If you’re going to be doing these dissociatives you need to be in a safe location around people you genuinely trust to keep you safe when you cannot respond. While at lower doses it can produce euphoric feelings and similar sensations to other hallucinogens, it’s the effects at higher dosages that also make it popular in party settings as a “date rape drug” both because it can render victims motionless but it’s ability to cause short-term amnesia also means prepetrators will assume the victim will not remember what happened at all. While other drugs are used by rapists to trap victims, ketamine’s increasing availability and effects at high doses are attracting more and more predators to use it or take advantage of those they know will be or have taken ketamine.

Rohypnol, or “roofies” have always been the archetypal sedative for these predators, it can be abused on its own particularly for people who use cocaine to assist in the effects of the “comedown.” While not as common and no longer produced or approved for usage inside the United States, it’s still being used because of its muscle relaxant properties. Most people use the term “roofie” to refer more broadly to being drugged in these cases, but most victims usually aren’t able to know what substance was actually used on them unless they have prior experience using those drugs. These substances will only last for so long in the system and have a short window for showing up in a drug test, so it can be difficult to know exactly which sedative was used.

GHB is the last primary “date rape” and club drug that we see used, and typically comes in a liquid form. Being a central nervous system depressant, it can cause loss of consciousness, amnesia, nausea, hallucinations, euphoria, excessive sweating, and potentially a coma. While it is a naturally occurring acid found in the human body, there’s a reason our body regulates it in such small amounts so that it doesn’t accidentally kill us by overproducing it. Taking it as a drug is incredibly addicting, thanks to its fast acting properties, but its withdrawal symptoms are severe and could kill you on their own. As with many of these drugs working on the central nervous system, that depressant effect is on your respiratory system as well and can dangerously slow your breathing, particularly if you’re mixing these substances with each other and/or alcohol. This is one of the major risks with most of these drugs, aside from the overdose risk, is the factor of the respiratory depression that can be worsened by mixing other drugs.

As much as it’s an awful name, these “date rape drugs” are called such because they’re preferred by predators to facilitate assaults. Alcohol alone is considered to be in this category, but alcoholic drinks are the most common way for rapists to slip in other substances as most are colorless, odorless, and tasteless. There are some companies, like Undercover Colors, that make on-the-go tests so you can take a drop of your drink and tell if it’s spiked, which I can personally vouch for as saving my skin on at least on occasion, but they’re not widely known about, can be expensive, and may not respond to every sedative used, just the top three. I would still recommend them if you are interested in having some on hand for peace of mind regardless of your gender, they come in these small chips you can attach to your phone, keys, or just slip inside your pocket when you’re going to be out drinking. Even if you don’t drink alcohol, they’re great to have on hand to make sure you stay safe when out.

There’s a general misconception that by providing testing sites and kits that it will encourage or be seen as endorsing the usage of those drugs. The issue with that argument is that people are using drugs anyways, regardless of the risk. What access to tests does provide is overdose prevention and the ability to flag tainted supplies to find others who may have purchased tainted drugs. It can also provide better data for use patterns and trends so we can gain a better understanding of what people are actually taking. Several festivals and events have already allowed organizations to have drug testing sites on their grounds so that partiers can have their drugs tested before they take them so they know what they’re actually using. It’s not a trap for cops to arrest people with their drugs, I have actually heard several friends of mine say that with no basis for it, it’s all anonymous and they may just record what they’re testing and the result they get for data purposes and so they could potentially intervene if others have similar issues with their supply. While fentanyl is always a risk regardless of substance, a lot of these party drugs are substituted with other potentially toxic substances as “fillers” or “replacements” by manufacturers to the point it’s largely known by addiction professionals that most MDMA doesn’t contain any MDMA at all, rather mixtures of fillers and other drugs to mimic the look of it for ingestion. That doesn’t make pure MDMA safe, in fact taking 100% MDMA will put you at a high risk of overdose and death. Finding pure forms of drugs would also alarm any professional testers and prevent deaths from overconcentration when spotted.

Taking these drugs will never be 100% safe or risk free. You will always get the good and the bad with these party drugs and their effects, but as I’ve been saying there are ways to protect yourself if you do make the choice to use. Testing your supply, taking a small amount, keeping lots of water on hand, NARCAN just in case, and having a sober, trusted friend to keep an eye on you while you’re incapacitated are all completely legal ways to be safe, smart, and responsible when making those choices. Until next time, I’ve been Alex Baker, signing off.