



# INFORMATION BULLETIN

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U. S. D E P A R T M E N T O F J U S T I C E

## *MDMA* *in New England*

### **Overview**

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MDMA is increasingly available in New England and is rapidly becoming a significant drug threat, especially to youth. MDMA is very popular among New England high school and college students, many of whom are attending an ever-increasing number of rave parties held in the region (see textbox). Although relatively small quantities are produced in New England, most MDMA is transported into the area directly from Europe in express mail packages or from New York City by private vehicle or mail. According to the New England High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), law enforcement in the region believes that instructions on the Internet pertaining to the manufacture of MDMA may facilitate regional production.

Wholesale distribution of MDMA in New England appears to be controlled mostly by Israeli and Russian criminal organizations in the Boston area. Caucasian, middle-class youth aged 18 to 25 are the primary retail distributors of the drug at raves and nightclubs in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine, and New Hampshire. Raves have yet to reach Vermont, and MDMA retailing within that state remains limited to bars and private residences. Due in large part

to the expansion of the rave culture, the availability of MDMA and abuse of the drug by New England youth are expected to increase.

### **Background**

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MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine), also called Adam, ecstasy, XTC, E, and X, is a stimulant and low-level hallucinogen. MDMA was patented in 1914 in Germany where it was sometimes given to psychiatric patients to assist in psychotherapy, a practice never approved by the American Psychological Association or the Food and Drug Administration. Users claim that MDMA, sometimes called the "hug drug," helps them become more in touch with others and opens channels of communication. However, use of the drug can cause psychological problems similar to those associated with methamphetamine and cocaine abuse including confusion, depression, sleep problems, anxiety, and paranoia. The physical effects can include muscle tension, involuntary teeth clenching, blurred vision, and increased heart rate and blood pressure. MDMA use can also cause a marked increase in body temperature leading to muscle breakdown, kidney failure, cardiovascular failure, stroke, or seizure, and can be fatal. Recent research suggests

MDMA use may result in long-term and sometimes permanent damage to parts of the brain that are critical to thought and memory. Individuals who develop a rash after MDMA use may be at a greater risk for severe liver damage or other serious complications.

## Abuse

Law enforcement agencies in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine, and New Hampshire indicate that the abuse of MDMA is increasing in their states. Vermont law enforcement authorities note little abuse of MDMA locally; however, they do report that some Vermont youth travel to Canada to participate in raves where they use MDMA.

The rave culture is expanding from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island northward to New Hampshire and Maine. In all five states, law enforcement notes the correlation between the increasing number of raves and the rise in the MDMA abuser population. In January 2001, a 23-year-old Boston man died after returning from a rave party in Hartford, Connecticut. Law enforcement reported that he made the trip with eight other men from New England and took MDMA in a drug cocktail obtained at the rave. In New Hampshire, law enforcement officers investigating reports of disturbances in forested areas of the state have found cocaine and currency as well as MDMA and water bottles, indicators of rave activity.

## Production

Although most MDMA is produced in Europe, particularly the Netherlands and Belgium, some MDMA is produced in New England. In April 2001, police arrested a man with 60 MDMA pills in North Stonington, Connecticut, and later discovered on his property an MDMA laboratory that was capable of producing significant amounts of the drug. The man reportedly sold MDMA to customers in Connecticut and Rhode Island.

According to the New England HIDTA, law enforcement indicates that information on the Internet pertaining to the manufacture of MDMA may be used to facilitate regional production. MDMA production is somewhat difficult but still within the capabilities of many young people, assuming they can obtain the necessary precursor chemicals. MDMA is synthesized from several precursor chemicals, most of which are federally controlled. Producers can use the Internet to identify suppliers of these chemicals and to obtain recipes and instructions on MDMA production. Many web sites simply post a description of the MDMA production process published by Alexander and Ann Shulgin in their book *Phenethylamines I Have Known And Loved: A Chemical Love Story* (aka "PIHKAL"), or provide a hyperlink to a web site that posts the description. Alternate methods for synthesizing MDMA and its analogs, such as MDA (3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine), are easily found on the Internet.

## Raves

High energy, all-night dances known as raves, which feature hard pounding techno-music and flashing laser lights, are increasing in popularity among teens and young adults. Raves occur in most metropolitan areas of the country at nightclubs, abandoned warehouses, open fields, and civic centers. Club drugs, a group of synthetic drugs including MDMA, are common at raves. Rave managers often sell water, pacifiers, and glow sticks at rave parties. MDMA users drink water to offset dehydration caused by MDMA, use pacifiers to prevent teeth grinding—a common side effect of using MDMA—and wave glow sticks in front of the eyes because MDMA stimulates light perception.

## **Transportation**

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Most of the world's MDMA is manufactured in the Netherlands and Belgium. Israeli and Russian criminal organizations most commonly control the smuggling of MDMA into the United States and its transportation within the country. MDMA is smuggled from major European air hubs via express mail, airfreight shipments, or couriers aboard commercial airline flights to New York City, which serves as the primary transportation hub for MDMA available in New England. MDMA is then transported by private vehicle from New York City to New England. Traffickers also ship some MDMA directly to New England from Europe via express mail, and there have been incidents of MDMA being transported to New England from Canada, California, and Florida.

- In March 2000, a Canadian man was arrested at Boston's Logan International Airport with 15,000 MDMA tablets strapped to his stomach. He had acquired the tablets in Brussels, Belgium.
- In April 2000, \$4.5 million worth of MDMA was seized in Boston, the largest MDMA seizure in New England history. Following the seizure, U.S. Customs officials conducted a controlled delivery and arrested two Israeli citizens, who had shipped the drug from Paris to Boston via express mail.
- In May 2001, a college student from Connecticut attending school in Lewiston, Maine, was arrested after receiving a package containing MDMA tablets sent from a supplier in the Czech Republic. The student had met the supplier while on an international educational exchange program.

## **Distribution**

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Israeli and Russian criminal organizations that coordinate the smuggling of MDMA into the United States and its transportation within the country are most commonly involved in the wholesale distribution of

MDMA in Massachusetts. Dominican organizations are becoming increasingly involved as well in the wholesale distribution of MDMA in Massachusetts. In the other New England states, there are no reports of wholesale distribution.

Caucasian, middle-class youth aged 18 to 25 control most retail distribution in New England. Retail distribution of MDMA takes place principally at raves and nightclubs in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Maine, and New Hampshire, and at some bars and private residences in Vermont. MDMA distribution is beginning to occur in other locations as well. For instance, in December 2000, five teenagers and young adults were arrested for selling MDMA, ketamine (a veterinary preoperative anesthetic), and LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide) at a pizza outlet in Glastonbury, Connecticut. The Maine Drug Enforcement Agency Lyman Task Force reports that several cocaine dealers in its region sell MDMA with cocaine.

## **Outlook**

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MDMA distribution and abuse will likely increase in New England in the near term. Demand is expected to grow with the popularity of the rave culture. Midsize and smaller towns in New England that currently have no MDMA problem could soon see a rise in MDMA activity. MDMA transporters in all likelihood will target such areas, particularly cities and towns with colleges and universities, to increase their market area and profits. Vermont is likely to experience a rise in the availability and abuse of MDMA if the rave culture emerges in the state. Dominican criminal organizations could become more involved over time with MDMA wholesale distribution if the MDMA market continues to yield large profits with limited risk.

## Sources

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U.S. Attorney's Office

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