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# Rohypnol

## Background information

Rohypnol is the trade name for the drug flunitrazepam, a benzodiazepine (central nervous system depressant) like Valium, yet 10 times more potent. Outside of the United States, Rohypnol is legally manufactured by Hoffman-LaRoche, Inc., and is available by prescription in the short-term treatment of severe sleep disorders. It is the most widely prescribed sedative in Europe, but is neither manufactured nor approved for sale in the United States. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse's (NIDA's) Community Epidemiology Work Group (CEWG), the illicit use of Rohypnol is characterized by its being taken with other drugs, although it may be used alone. Rohypnol is taken orally, snorted, or injected. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), abuse of Rohypnol is predominant among heroin and alcohol abusers. The drug is taken with alcohol or marijuana to enhance intoxication, a mode of abuse reportedly more common among younger, less experienced drug abusers. Rohypnol also enhances the high or eases withdrawal symptoms of heroin, mellows the high of cocaine, and eases a user down from a crack or cocaine binge.

## Availability of Rohypnol

Rohypnol is available in pill form and is usually sold in the manufacturer's bubble packaging, which may lead some users to believe it is a safe drug because it appears to be unadulterated or legal.

Hoffman-LaRoche recently reformulated Rohypnol to increase its detectability in clear fluids and retard its dissolution rate. With the reformulation, the new green tablets can be detected in clear fluids and are visible in the bottom of a cup. Spiking a drink will prove more difficult, because the tablets will dissolve slowly. Hoffman-LaRoche is in the process of submitting the new formulation for regulatory approval in the 80 countries in which it is marketed.

According to the DEA, counterfeit Rohypnol tablets have been encountered in the United States. Counterfeit tablets containing a benzodiazepine other than Rohypnol were first encountered in Florida in January 1997 and have since been seized in California, Hawaii, and Maryland. As of November 1997, Texas officials reported that other Mexican drug products were being imported and sold as a substitute for the drug. Reportedly, juveniles in Texas were commonly using Rivotril (a benzodiazepine used in the treatment of epilepsy) as a substitute for Rohypnol. Often, the users cannot distinguish Rohypnol from other benzodiazepines.

Rohypnol abuse and distribution were occasionally reported in the late 1980s in Florida and in the border areas of Arizona, California, and Texas. Beginning around 1993, the abuse and distribution of Rohypnol began to spread northward. As of June 1996, the DEA had documented more than 2,700 Federal, State, and local law enforcement encounters with Rohypnol, and by August 1997, encounters with Rohypnol were reported in 38 States. During the first 8 months of 1997, however, police encounters, seizures, and emergency department admissions related to Rohypnol were dramatically fewer than in previous years. The vast majority of Rohypnol-related law enforcement cases occurred between January 1993 and December 1996.

As of March 5, 1996, the U.S. Customs Service began seizing all quantities of Rohypnol at U.S. borders, on the basis of advice from the DEA and the Food and Drug Administration. According to the DEA, large amounts of Rohypnol are being found in seizures of drugs, mainly from Mexico. Rohypnol is commonly smuggled and transported through the mail or commercial delivery services. Due to the U.S. Customs Service ban on Rohypnol, the supply and availability of the drug in Florida reportedly had dropped substantially by December 1997.

## Scheduling

As a result of increasing worldwide abuse and trafficking, in March 1995, the Commission on Narcotic Drugs of the United Nations transferred Rohypnol from Schedule IV to Schedule III of the 1971 Convention of Psychotropic Substances. Rohypnol was the first benzodiazepine to require more rigid controls. According to the Federal Controlled Substances Act of 1970, Schedule III controlled substances have less potential for abuse than Schedule I or II drugs and may lead to moderate or low physical dependence or high psychological dependence, but they have some accepted medical use. In the United States, the importation of Rohypnol has been banned, and stiffer Federal penalties have been imposed. As of November 1997, Florida, Idaho, Minnesota, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Pennsylvania have placed Rohypnol under Schedule I control.

In response to Rohypnol abuse and use of the drug to facilitate sexual assaults, Congress passed the Drug-Induced Rape Prevention and Punishment Act, effective October 13, 1996. The law provides for harsher penalties regarding the distribution of a controlled substance to an individual without the individual's knowledge or consent and with the intent to commit a crime of violence, including rape. The law further imposes a penalty (up to 20 years) for the distribution and importation of 1 gram or more of Rohypnol.

## Effects

The effects of Rohypnol begin within 30 minutes of administration, peak within 2 hours, and may persist for at least 8 hours, depending on the amount ingested. The drug's metabolites can be detected in urine up to 72 hours after ingestion. When taking Rohypnol, individuals may experience a slowing of psychomotor performance, muscle relaxation, decreased blood pressure, sleepiness, and/or amnesia. Some of the side effects associated with Rohypnol use are drowsiness, headaches, memory impairment, dizziness, nightmares, and tremors. According to Hoffman-LaRoche, side effects occur mainly with high dosages (exceeding 4 mg) and are almost always related to the sedative and muscle relaxant properties of the drug. The package insert reads, "Some patients may have no recollection of any awakenings occurring in the 6 to 8 hours during which the drug exerts its action." Long-term use can lead to physical dependence and the need for medically supervised withdrawal.

## User characteristics

Rohypnol, which usually costs less than \$5 per tablet, has been used throughout the United States among high school and college students, rave and nightclub attendees, and drug addicts and alcohol abusers. In

some areas, the use of the drug has been associated with gang involvement. In the West and South, nightclub goers often combine methamphetamine and Rohypnol to make what is referred to as a club drug mix. In Texas, there have been reports of juveniles dissolving Rohypnol in soft drinks for a faster effect. College students who report using the drug mix it with beer to enhance the feeling of drunkenness. They also reported using Rohypnol in combination with marijuana, cocaine, and heroin.

## Regional observations

According to regional accounts, most of the adolescent treatment programs in south Florida have revealed that a large percentage of juveniles in treatment report at least one lifetime experience with Rohypnol. Sources further report that established drug dealers have sought out school-aged children to sell the tablets to their peers. A dealer sells a juvenile 50–100 Rohypnol tablets at "wholesale" prices, or \$1 per tablet. The juvenile is then able to sell the pills to friends for \$2–\$3 apiece, making a few hundred dollars profit in a short time. By targeting these youth to distribute the drug, not only do the dealers benefit financially, but they are able to expand their market for the other drugs they distribute, such as marijuana and cocaine.

Also in south Florida, there have been reports of individuals driving under the influence of Rohypnol. In spring 1995, Dade County began a program to address this problem. If a police officer stops a motorist for suspected drunk driving, and the driver's blood alcohol content is low, the officer may choose to call in another officer who has been trained to recognize sedative impairment. The specially trained officer will evaluate the motorist and, if needed, a urinalysis will be conducted. In addition to this program, Florida medical examiners began screening for the presence of Rohypnol in all drug-related deaths.

According to the CEWG, in 1995 and early 1996, Rohypnol use was widespread in Texas. Hispanic youth and gang members were the primary users in the lower Texas–Mexico border area. Throughout the rest of the State, however, college students and middle-class young adults, as well as younger adolescents and older polydrug abusers, used Rohypnol. The 1997 findings of a Texas school survey revealed that, although the prevalence of Rohypnol was low, the drug reportedly continued to be used across the State. In 1997, Hispanic males residing in the border counties of Texas were the largest demographic group admitted into drug treatment centers with a Rohypnol-related drug problem.

## Slang terms

Date-rape drug	Robotal
Forget-me drug	Rochas dos
Forget pill	Roche
La Rocha	Roofiese
Lunch money drug	Rope
Mexican valium	Rophies
Mind erasers	Rophy
Pingus	Ropies
R-2	Row-shay
Reynolds	Ruffles
Rib	Ruffles
Ro	Trip-and-fall
Roachies	Wolfies
Roopies	

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