

Alcohol & Drug-Facilitated Sexual Assault

In a survey conducted at the University of Alberta, it was found that over half of the sexual assaults experienced by students took place when the individual who was harmed was under the influence of alcohol or drugs (LoVerso, 2001). Alcohol, whether alone or in conjunction with other substances, is by far the most commonly used substance used in sexual assault situations. When alcohol is the only drug used, often the individuals who experienced the sexual assault may feel that they got drunker than they had planned to that night, or they have some memories of sexual contact that they did not consent to.

Because drugs or alcohol are involved in these assaults, individuals who experience them are even more likely to blame themselves for what happened. They may feel that they were at fault because they were voluntarily engaging in substance use, or they may be upset at themselves for not “being careful enough” if they were given a drug without their knowledge. It is important to understand that regardless of whether the substances were used willingly or not, it is not the fault of the individual who was harmed. Drinking or engaging in substance use is a very common, socially accepted activity, and consenting to consuming alcohol or drugs is absolutely not consenting to sexual activity. The individual who used offending behaviours is the only person who is to blame. The Criminal Code of Canada states this as well, saying that consent for sexual activity cannot be obtained when an individual is incapable of consenting (i.e. blacked out, impaired by alcohol or drugs, or sleeping).

In a drug-facilitated sexual assault, the person who commits the sexual assault uses alcohol or other drugs (sometimes referred to as date rape drugs) as a method to decrease resistance from the person they are assaulting. This choice is also strategic, as consumption of drugs or alcohol means the individual may not recall enough details about the assault for charges to be laid against the individual who used offending behaviours. According to a study conducted in 2006¹, Gee and colleagues identify two primary type of drug facilitated sexual assault:

- 1. Proactive:** occurs when the individual who experiences the sexual assault is made to take “an incapacitating or disinhibiting substance by an assailant for the purpose of a sexual assault”. In other words, this is when someone is forcibly or covertly given substances for the purpose of being violated.
- 2. Opportunistic:** occurs when someone identifies an individual that has been voluntarily using substances and chooses to target them.

Unlike other substances used in sexual assault situations, alcohol is often also consumed by the individual who used offending behaviour. By using alcohol, they are able to lower their own inhibitions, therefore making it easier for them to harm others. They may also try and use the fact that they were drinking alcohol as an excuse, by saying they were “too drunk” to know what they were doing. Being intoxicated is not an excuse for sexually assaulting someone, legally or otherwise.

¹ Gee D, Owen P, McLean I, et al. Operation MATISSE: investigating drug facilitated sexual assault. London (UK): Association of Chief Police Officers; 2006. Available: www.acpo.police.uk/asp/policies/Data/Operatin%20Matisse%20report%20-%20press%20rel.%2084.doc (accessed 2009 Jan. 26).

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Substances Other Than Alcohol

Like anyone who experiences a sexual assault, someone who experiences a drug-facilitated sexual assault will need time to go through the healing process, and it may be even more difficult for them due to the lack of understanding about what they are experiencing. Depending on the drug that was used, some individuals may have little memory of what took place or no memory of being sexually assaulted at all. In either case, the individual may still experience symptoms related to being sexually assaulted, such as flashbacks and sudden memories. Having indications that a sexual assault occurred, or having “blacked out” and not being able to recall what happened, can lead to the individual feeling as though they are “going crazy.” or can lead others to mistrust what they are feeling.

Because someone who has experienced a drug-facilitated sexual assault may not remember everything that occurred, they may have trouble communicating to others what happened. When someone cannot tell the whole story in chronological order they sometimes face doubt or disbelief from others. It is important to remember that someone does not have to remember everything that occurred in order to know they have been harmed, and if someone is intoxicated to the point that they are “blacked out” or unconscious, unable to understand what is happening, or unable to move, they cannot consent to sexual activity.

Some of the more well-known drugs used in drug-facilitated sexual assault include Rohypnol (also known as “roofies”, “the forget pill” or “flunitrazepam”), GHB (Gamma-hydroxybutyrate),

Ketamine, and Ecstasy. The effects of each of these drugs vary; however, they all have certain common side effects or symptoms which include sedative effects that, depending on the drug, can last from 30 minutes to 24 hours. Other effects include short-term memory loss, vomiting, numbness, or a temporary inability to move. Some of these drugs may pose serious health risks, especially when combined with alcohol.

Most folks who experienced a sexual assault involving drugs report suddenly feeling strangely lightheaded and intoxicated, with visual and/or physical impairment, and then waking up drowsy, confused, weak, and/or with impaired motor skills, with almost no recollection of what took place. Often when they can remember parts of the assault they recall feeling paralyzed, powerless, and/or dissociated from their body, or they only remember scattered pieces of what occurred.

Someone who has experienced a drug-facilitated sexual assault is likely to feel very confused and disoriented. This confusion may be accentuated by the continued effects of the drugs that can make it difficult to think clearly. The loss of memory that is sometimes experienced in drug-facilitated sexual assaults can make recovery more difficult—this is because part of the recovery process involves remembering and working through the memories, acknowledging that what happened was a sexual assault, and experiencing feelings around the sexual assault such as anger, regret, and acceptance. All of that said—recovery without these memories is still possible!

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Common Myths around Alcohol & Drug Facilitated Sexual Assault

There are many common myths in our society about the role of drugs and alcohol in sexual assault. These ideas are harmful and can lead others to not believe the folks in their life who disclose having experienced a sexual assault, or can lead people to blame themselves for their assault. For example, there is a common misconception that accepting drinks from someone indicates interest in sexual activity. Yet, consenting to having a drink is not consenting to sexual activity; it is solely consenting to having a drink.

Much of the information about date rape drugs emphasizes ways in which individuals (often women, specifically) can stay safe from these drugs, especially while drinking in public. Examples include only accepting drinks from people you know and keeping an eye on your drink at all times. These statements are misleading for several reasons. First, drugs can be used in many locations, not just in public spaces.

The Sexual Assault Centre has seen cases where drugs were used at house parties, restaurants, and while camping. Second, we know that it is more common for the individual who commits a sexual assault to be a friend, partner, or acquaintance to the person they are harming². And third, these statements are almost always directed at women, but individuals of all genders can, and do, experience drug-facilitated sexual assault.

It is important to recognize that these statements do not place the responsibility for the sexual assault on the individual who is using substances to incapacitate someone and sexually assault them, but instead on those who are sexually assaulted. This results in many folks feeling as though they were responsible for their sexual assault—but the only person who should be held responsible is the perpetrator of the assault.

Indications of a Sexual Assault

In drug-facilitated sexual assaults, it is possible that the individual has little or no recollection of a sexual assault. The following are some indications that a drug-facilitated sexual assault may have occurred:

Physical Indications

- Soreness in the genital or anal areas
- Marks or bruises on the skin
- Abnormal discharge and/or bleeding

Other Indications

- Loss of memory for a whole part of an evening or day
- Waking up in different surroundings and not knowing how you got there
- Waking up with clothes missing or put on differently
- A sense that something wrong happened or that something is “not right”

² Cantor, D., Fisher, B., Chibnall, S., & Townsend, R. (2017). *Report on the AAU Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct* (pp. 1-288, Rep.). Rockville, MD: Westat. <https://www.aau.edu/sites/default/files/AAU-Files/Key-Issues/Campus-Safety/AAU-Campus-Climate-Survey-FINAL-10-20-17.pdf>

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Medical Attention

If a drug-facilitated sexual assault takes place or is suspected, you have the option to request tests for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and/or pregnancy, and if possible to ascertain if a drug was used.

Rohypnol, GHB, Ketamine, and Ecstasy are processed by the body quickly and are thus difficult to detect. When testing for drugs, the closer to the time of the drugging as possible is best, as after 72 hours detection will be impossible. It also varies depending on the drug used; for example, GHB can be untraceable in only 12 hours, whereas Rohypnol will be traceable up to 72 hours. Drugs are detected through a urine sample test, but rohypnol can also be detected through a blood test.

A physical exam after a sexual assault can be very difficult, but in Edmonton there are services such as SART, the STI Clinic and the University Health Centre that can help make the process more comfortable. The U of A Sexual Assault Centre can also provide more information about medical options and support folks through this process.

SART (The Sexual Assault Response Team) consists of a team of nurses who examine and treat individuals who have been sexually assaulted within the last 7 days. SART is available 24 hours a day,

7 days a week, and can be accessed by letting the triage nurse at any Emergency Room in the Edmonton Area know that you would like to see a SART nurse. The SART nurses perform physical examinations to look for and treat injuries after a sexual assault, and can collect evidence for future legal prosecution of the sexual assault if the individual chooses to pursue this (such as a urine sample to test for the presence of drugs). If the individual wants physical evidence to be recorded through the use of a sexual assault kit, the police will be phoned. This does not mean that the individual has to report to the police, but the police will be there to take the completed kit from the SART nurse to ensure continuity of the evidence, and talk with the individual if they are willing.

If the individual is concerned with the possibility of having contracted an STI, the STI Clinic in Edmonton provides free, confidential and anonymous testing. Another option is the University Health Centre, who can provide requisitions for various tests.