A Crackdown on Ecstasy

The DEA outlaws the country's latest pop drug

Propponents claim that it delivers a gentle two-to-four-hour journey that dissolves anxieties and leaves you relaxed and emotionally open, without the bad trips or addictive problems of other psychoactive drugs. The Drug Enforcement Administration says MDMA, or Ecstasy as it is known on the street, is an uncontrolled and rapidly spreading recreational drug that can cause psychosis and possibly brain damage. Last week the DEA banned Ecstasy by labeling it with the more severe emergency Schedule I controlled-substance classification. That being is reserved for drugs like heroin and LSD, which have a high potential for abuse.

The DEA acted because tens of thousands of tablets and capsules of MDMA are being sold on the street each month, at $8 to $20 for a 100-mg dose. The drug, which works particularly well with college students and young professionals, has spread from California, Texas, Florida, and about 20 other states and its use has been accelerating in the past few months, said John Lawn, acting administrator. "All of the evidence now received shows that MDMA abuse has become a nationwide problem and that it poses a serious health threat."

Ecstasy was prohibited under the Controlled Substances Act of 1984, which allows the DEA to ban a drug temporarily when faced with a threat to public health. In March the ban was upheld against the so-called entheogen heroin drug DMT (dimethyltryptamine). As a result of MDMA's classification, which takes effect July 1, both manufacturers and sellers of the drug would be subject to fines of $125,000 and 10-year prison sentences. Possession would be a misdemeanor.

A derivative of oil of asepsins or oil of nutmegs, MDMA is known chemically as 3,4-methylenedioxyamphetamine and is not a new drug. It was synthesized in 1914 by chemists who thought mistakenly that it was a relative of amphetamine but might be an appetite suppressant.

A Los Angeles psychologist tells a group of psychiatrists, psychologists and other contended that MDMA has enormous therapeutic potential. Says James Blakely of the Harvard Medical School: "I think the DEA's decision is precipitate. It's difficult to make a case that this is a serious threat to the nation's health or safety."

sanity, it enabled me to recover my soul."

Therapists who endorse MDMA say that it does not produce the high of marijuana, the rush of cocaine or amphetamine (speed) or the hallucinations of LSD. Users, they say, develop a tolerance for the chemical, and, according to some therapists, do not appear to become addicted.

Others are not so sure. Ronald K. Siegel, a psychiatry professor at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, believes that reactions to MDMA are unpredictable and highly variable, and that the drug is like a "Chemical Melting Pot" that makes me feel odd."

But Deputy Administrator Gene Haldin says that research at the University of Chicago has found brain damage resulting from a single dose of MMA a hallucinogenic muromine derivative related to Ecstasy. Although the drugs are believed to affect the brain in a similar manner, Haldin said. Federal officials say that drug-treatment programs around the country have reported "psychotic episodes" among MDMA users. Even the most avid supporters of Ecstasy warn that it should be limited.

The ban is expected to spread to other states and the nation, but the DEA has promised to expedite registration procedures so that legitimate research into the drug can continue. Although researchers will no longer be allowed to give it to patients, Support of MMA will be able to press their case in front of the Food and Drug Administration.

In Massachusetts, Diane Watson, who was dying of cancer, took the drug under a doctor's supervision because she could not bear the suffering of her illness. Says she: "MDMA opened up a great emotional sharing. In another case, Kathy Tamm of San Francisco, who suffered from severe attacks of panic 4% after being raped, was able while using Ecstasy, to confront her memories of the assault. At Tamm explained to her psychiatrist, "Not only did MDMA enable me to recover my sanity, it enabled me to recover my soul."

Therapists who endorse MDMA say that it does not produce the high of marijuana, the rush of cocaine or amphetamine (speed) or the hallucinations of LSD. Users, they say, develop a tolerance for the chemical, and, according to some therapists, do not appear to become addicted.

Others are not so sure. Ronald K. Siegel, a psychiatry professor at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute, believes that reactions to MDMA are unpredictable and highly variable, and that the drug is like a "Chemical Melting Pot" that makes me feel odd."

But Deputy Administrator Gene Haldin says that research at the University of Chicago has found brain damage resulting from a single dose of MMA a hallucinogenic muromine derivative related to Ecstasy. Although the drugs are believed to affect the brain in a similar manner, Haldin said. Federal officials say that drug-treatment programs around the country have reported "psychotic episodes" among MDMA users. Even the most avid supporters of Ecstasy warn that it should be limited.

The ban is expected to spread to other states and the nation, but the DEA has promised to expedite registration procedures so that legitimate research into the drug can continue. Although researchers will no longer be allowed to give it to patients, Support of MMA will be able to press their case in front of the Food and Drug Administration.

In Massachusetts, Diane Watson, who was dying of cancer, took the drug under a doctor's supervision because she could not bear the suffering of her illness. Says she: "MDMA opened up a great emotional sharing. In another case, Kathy Tamm of San Francisco, who suffered from severe attacks of panic 4% after being raped, was able while using Ecstasy, to confront her memories of the assault. At Tamm explained to her psychiatrist, "Not only did MDMA enable me to recover my