The Chicago connection

By Jon Van
Science writer...

"Ecstasy," a street drug touted for its focusing effect and self-understanding, found its most influential critics among people who have little interest in or knowledge of so-called "street drugs."

But their basic studies into the nature of how the brain works led them to information that Ecstasy, no matter how good it may make a person feel, likely is producing long-term brain deterioration.

"Ten years of MDMA, or Ecstasy, are said to be the equivalent of a year of normal aging of brain cells," said Seiden, one of the principal investigators of the study.

Seiden's research team has found that the drug produces a steady decline in the number of neurons in the brain, leading to a loss of memory and other cognitive functions.

"The effects of Ecstasy are more pronounced in older individuals," said Seiden. "Our findings suggest that the drug has a cumulative impact on the brain's ability to function normally."