

Drink spiking

What is drink spiking?

Drink spiking is the practice of adding alcohol or another substance to a drink without the knowledge of the person who will be consuming it. As a result the person could become intoxicated unexpectedly.

Is it legal?

Drink spiking is not only illegal, it is a serious crime, with severe penalties for persons convicted. Section 74 of the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981* (Vic.) states that it is an offence to introduce a drug into the body of another person. Offences under the *Crimes Act* relate to administration of a drug in order to commit a sexual offence. Penalties include heavy fines and imprisonment ranging from 1 year to 25 years.

Why should we be concerned?

Drink spiking is not a new phenomenon, but in recent years it has become a growing problem worldwide. It has come to be associated with an increase in certain types of crime, in particular drug-assisted sexual assault. In Australia in 2002, about a quarter of victims of sexual assault reported that they had been drugged. Research also shows that more than 90 per cent of victims of drug-assisted sexual assault are women, and that more than a third of all victims are aged 16–24 years. In about a

third of cases, the offender is known to the victim, as a friend or acquaintance.

The drinks most commonly spiked are alcoholic drinks, but there is evidence that drugs have been administered via soft drinks, coffee, tea and hot chocolate. It only takes a second to drop in a pill, or some powder or liquid. The person may not notice a change in their drink, especially if they are in a social setting such as at a noisy pub or a party. Some drugs used to spike drinks have no colour, taste or smell, and may take a while to affect the person. As the drug takes effect the person could become unconscious, and later, when its effects have worn off, the person may not be able to remember what happened.

What are the dangers?

Drink spiking can expose a person to dangerous situations, such as:

- assault
- robbery
- sexual assault and unsafe sex
- health effects of unknown drugs.

Perpetrators of drink spiking find it relatively easy to gain control of their victims. The drugs used in drink spiking can immobilise and silence the victim. By using drugs, the offender does not have to use physical force or overcome any form of resistance from the victim, they do not have to threaten the person to get

compliance and they do not have to be concerned about the person's screams attracting attention. In addition, because of the effects of certain drugs, victims are often confused about exactly what happened, and therefore tend not to report the incident until it is too late to collect vital evidence, such as testing urine to detect the presence of drugs. Others may be treated in hospital but do not report the incident because they are embarrassed or believe it was their fault.

What drugs are used?

Alcohol

Alcohol is the most common drug used to assist sexual assault. Examples of alcohol-spiked drinks include having alcohol added to a non-alcoholic drink, or having an alcoholic drink loaded with unrequested shots of spirits.

Rohypnol

Rohypnol is a drug commonly used in drink spiking. Rohypnol is the brand name for flunitrazepam, a depressant drug related to Valium (but 10 times more potent). Depressant drugs slow down the activity of the brain and other parts of the central nervous system.

Available in pill form, Rohypnol is usually prescribed as a sedative, to help people sleep or to relieve stress. The manufacturer's warnings include that 'some patients may have no recollection of any awakenings occurring in the six to eight hours during which the drug exerts its actions'. Use of alcohol with Rohypnol intensifies these effects so that the person may not remember some or all events that took place after they were drugged, including sexual assault.

The drug's effects can start within 15 to 30 minutes, and may last up to 8 hours or longer,

depending on the amount used. Effects include sedation, dizziness, loss of motor skills, muscle relaxation, slurred speech, memory impairment, impaired judgement, loss of inhibition, loss of consciousness, visual disturbances and nausea. Used on its own, and particularly with alcohol or other drugs, Rohypnol can and has resulted in death.

GHB

Gamma hydroxybutyrate acid (GHB) has also been identified as a 'date-rape drug', due to effects of amnesia, impairing movement and speech, and because it can be added to drinks without visible trace.

GHB is also known as 'fantasy', 'grievous bodily harm (GBH)', liquid ecstasy and 'liquid E'. It comes as a colourless, odourless, bitter or salty-tasting liquid, or as a crystal powder.

GHB has been used medically as a general anaesthetic and to treat sleep disorders. It has also been trialled as a treatment for alcohol and heroin withdrawal. Bodybuilders have used it to promote the release of a growth hormone during sleep, and in recent years some people on the dance/club scene have used it for its euphoric and sedative effects.

GHB can cause hallucinations, extreme drowsiness, vomiting, convulsions or seizures, and unconsciousness or abrupt short-term coma. Combined with alcohol, GHB can be extremely dangerous, causing respiratory depression, unconsciousness and worse.

Other drugs

In recent months, there have been reports of midazolam (trade name Hypnovel), a prescription drug widely used in hospitals, being used in drug-assisted sexual assault. Other drugs used in drink spiking include ethanol, temazepam and methamphetamines.

Safety strategies: what you can do

Many victims do not report the incident until it is too late to collect vital evidence, such as testing urine to detect the presence of drugs. Others may be treated in hospital but do not report the incident because they are embarrassed or believe it was their fault. Drink spiking is a crime; reporting incidents to the police can help to ensure that offenders are prosecuted. Other strategies can help to educate the community and make the social environment safer for everyone:

Venues and hosts

- Display information and warning posters.
- Set aside a 'chill out' room or safe space for women.
- Ensure that security staff are visible inside and outside the venue.
- Provide facilities for patrons to call a taxi and a safe waiting area.
- If an apparently intoxicated or ill person appears to be uncomfortable with the person they are leaving with, ask them if they require assistance or a taxi. Ask the person escorting them for identification, and record their details. This may prevent an incident occurring, and may assist with identification of offenders if something does occur.

Hospitality and other staff

Look out for:

- persons putting any substances into another person's drink, or pouring two or more drinks into one glass

- anyone appearing to be plying another person with excessive amounts of alcohol
- persons appearing to be excessively intoxicated despite not having consumed much or any alcohol at all
- verbal and physical cues from an apparently intoxicated person that they are not comfortable with the person/s escorting them from the premises.

Patrons

- Watch your drinks.
- Avoid sharing drinks, and be wary of accepting drinks from people you don't know very well. However, remember that many people have their drinks spiked by someone they know.
- Buy your own drinks and know what you are drinking. Do not drink something you did not open, or see opened or poured.
- If you feel dizzy or ill, ask a friend or someone you trust to take you to a safe place.
- Try to stick with your group. Potential offenders may try to isolate you.
- Keep an eye on your friends. If someone collapses and is unconscious, call an ambulance immediately—but do not leave them alone.
- Report the incident—report sexual assault to the police and seek assistance from a counsellor or health centre. Report drink spiking or suspected spiking to venue staff or the police.

In an emergency, telephone 000 or the nearest police station. For information about sexual assault, or for counselling or referral, contact CASA House on tel. 9344 2210 (24 hours) or after hours in rural areas tel. 1800 806 292. For information about drugs see our website at www.druginfo.adf.org.au.