

Drink Spiking

Drink spiking, or the contamination of a drink with substances intended to induce intoxication or incapacitation, is a concern that the media has highlighted in recent times. In fact, it's not a new issue – many older readers will remember the term “Mickey Finn” for a drink that has been “doctored”.

How often does it happen?

It can be difficult to estimate. The number of suspected cases reported to authorities in Australia in the twelve months 2002-2003 was between 3000 and 4000. Approximately one third of these incidents involved sexual assault; and between 15 and 19 suspected drink spiking incidents occurred per 100,000 persons in Australia during 2002/03.

However, unless medical assistance is sought, or the police are notified as a result of the consequences, cases are not recorded – so this number may be a gross underestimate. The Australian Institute of Criminology supports this. Only 25% of victims ringing a designated hotline actually reported the incident to the police. Another 20-40% reported to a hospital or a doctor.

What are the risks?

The potential consequences of drink spiking can be severe, both physically and emotionally, depending on the type of additive used and the motivation of the perpetrator. A primary risk is over-intoxication; the victim is incapacitated and unable to behave responsibly or look after themselves. Memory loss, nausea and dizziness can occur.

Dangerous physical consequences may follow: over-depression of the brain or CNS - leading to respiratory (breathing) suppression and coma is an example. Injury due to impaired coordination is another. Impaired judgment and behavioural abnormalities are also frequent – people behave in ways they would not ordinarily consider due to the incapacitation. This may also render them vulnerable to others, predators – assault and rape are often the intention of a drink spiking.

What is used?

Despite much publicity of other drugs, **alcohol** is by far the most frequently used substance – both in spiking a non-alcoholic drink or the doubling-up of an intended one.

Rohypnol, known as the ‘date rape drug’ is used here in Australia less often than feared. Other substances that have been used include **gamma-hydroxybutyrate** (GHB, known as fantasy or liquid ecstasy) and **ketamine** (a veterinary tranquiliser, known as Special K).

The risks of mixing alcohol and these substances are often far greater than the risk of each substance alone. Sadly, some instances of deliberate self-use have been reported. In all cases, a victim is left at great disadvantage – physically or psychologically unable to avoid dangerous situations or assault.

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Drink Spiking...

How can you tell?

The substances mentioned above can be very difficult to detect in drinks – they are often colourless, odourless and tasteless. Other than alcohol, these substances can be difficult to test for – they have a short half life in the bloodstream, so that by the time tests are done, often nothing is detectable.

People should watch for signs of heavier-than-expected intoxication - disorientation, lack of coordination, lack of response to others, loss of consciousness in more severe cases.

How can people avoid it?

People should carefully monitor their drinks – alcoholic or otherwise – and those of their friends. This includes:

- Making sure that they don't lose track of how much alcohol they have consumed.
- Don't allow strangers to buy or provide drinks.
- Watch the drinks – and your friends' drinks – and don't leave them unattended at any time. Watch for strangers hanging around the group.

Importantly, people should keep an eye out for their friends – don't let them out of sight if they are showing signs of intoxication or incapacitation. Get them home safely, with a designated driver, or supervised by someone trustworthy.

If a drink spiking is suspected, call an ambulance immediately.

- Let them know what has happened.
- If possible give them the drink that is suspect so it can be tested.

References:

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