Party drugs summer heat and secrets are a deadly mix

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Increased use of so-called party drugs makes the ancient Woodstock warning to “stay away from the brown acid” seem quaint. At bars, at home, at raves and concerts, people aren’t just freaking out. They are dying.

In the past two years, at least six Orange County residents have died after ingesting one of the two leading party drugs – MDMA, often called Ecstasy, or GHB, dubbed Liquid Ecstasy, according to Orange County coroner’s office statistics and other sources.

The national scene is more dire. GHB, gamma-hydroxybutyrate, long considered a date-rape drug, is now regarded as a party drug by many young adults. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that 1 percent of 12th-graders last year took GHB.

Death rates for GHB may be much higher. County coroner officials and national experts warn toxicological tests for GHB often can’t or don’t go deep enough – in part because of the complexity of chemical analogs – to determine if GHB was a cause of death.

Ecstasy, also called Molly, can be scarier, especially during the summer. The inexpensive drug sends body temperatures skyrocketing, a factor that can be deadly when mixed with outdoor festivals.

Exact numbers are in dispute, but at the Hard Summer festival in Pomona two weeks ago, at least three dozen people landed in hospitals after ingesting party drugs. Two women died of apparent overdoses: Katie Dix, 19, a Cal State Channel Islands student, and Tracy Nguyen, 18, a UCLA student.

Deadly toll

While the level of abuse remains unclear, the National Institute on Drug Abuse estimates 3.6 percent of high school seniors in 2014 took Ecstasy. It also found that nearly 13 percent of adults ages 18-25 had popped Ecstasy.

This summer, national media coverage has focused on festival-related deaths, and rightly so. Still, a review of deaths shows the diversity of lives lost. Here’s a run-down of deaths in the past
two years of people with Orange County connections. All are believed to be accidental, and it’s suspected or confirmed that the culprit was a party drug:

• Larry Badgwell, 51, died Jan, 21, 2013, at a motel in Garden Grove. The coroner blamed GHB and methamphetamine.

• David Cheeseman, 57, died Feb. 21, 2013, at his Costa Mesa home. Again, the coroner found GHB and methamphetamine.

• Jasmine Cornejo, 20, died Aug. 3, 2014, at West Anaheim Medical Center. The coroner reported MDMA, formally known as methylenedioxymethamphetamine, as a factor.

• Emily Tran, 19, of Anaheim died in August 2014 after suffering a seizure at the Hard Summer music festival in the Whittier Narrows Recreation Area. The Los Angeles County coroner reported meth and MDMA use.

• Erica Alonso, 28, of Laguna Hills disappeared in February. Her body was found several months later. The coroner found “a lethal combination” of GHB and alcohol.

• Nicholas Austin Tom, 24, a UCI graduate and a San Francisco medical assistant, died June 2 of Ecstasy intoxication after attending the Electric Daisy Carnival at the Las Vegas Motor Speedway.

About 135,000 fans attended that three-night dance music festival, where officials recorded 1,400 medical calls and 27 hospital transports. The previous year, officials reported three deaths. When Tom collapsed, temperatures were in the triple digits.

A father’s grief

Months after Erica Alonso’s death, it’s unknown exactly how or why the 28-year-old woman came to ingest a deadly cocktail of alcohol and GHB.

It’s also unknown why someone stuffed her body in a sack and dumped the sack in a ravine off Ortega Highway. Sheriff investigators say only that Alonso’s death wasn’t a homicide; it was an overdose.

Perhaps she was partying, though her father disputes that, just as he rules out suicide. Perhaps someone slipped GHB in her drink.

In the party-drug world where the code is silence – where young adults often try to save friends without notifying authorities – any of those scenarios is possible.

“Very few adults or adolescents,” says Deanne Thompson, spokeswoman for the county’s Health Care Agency, “seek treatment specifically for Ecstasy or GHB.”

To learn more, I met Alonzo’s father near the family’s home in Laguna Hills.
In the shade of a tree at a park, we share a quiet moment before settling at a picnic table where Isaac Alonso spent countless hours fashioning signs begging for his daughter’s return. The conversation is long, painful and filled with what-ifs.

He nods to a nearby creek choked with plants. “I scratched up my arms there looking for her.”

The last time Alonso saw his daughter was Valentine’s Day. He and his wife went to a church dance in Garden Grove. His daughter was supposed to babysit that night, but the child’s parents decided to stay home at the last minute. Instead, she went out with an on-off-again boyfriend.

“If I knew,” Alonso says before biting off his sentence to regain composure. “If I was there with her.” His eyes rimmed red from tears, Alonso confesses he sometimes hears his daughter’s voice. “Hi Dad, how’re you doing?”

Alonso says the day before we meet, he and his wife carried flowers and a cross down the ravine where his daughter’s body was found.

“Young adults need to be aware,” he says, “this is happening every weekend.”

Of GHB slipped in drinks, Alonso warns, “Women are being put to sleep. They have to be very, very careful.”

Dangerous mix

According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, GHB sells for $5 a swig in liquid form, $25 as a pill. Typically, Ecstasy is sold in doses or “stacks.” For a $30 stack, you can rock out. And die.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse notes, “on rare but unpredictable occasions, (Ecstasy) can lead to a sharp increase in body temperature (hyperthermia), which can result in liver, kidney or cardiovascular system failure or even death.”

Compounding these dangers is hyponatremia. If you drink too much water, even on a hot day, you can throw electrolytes out of whack. And die. What’s the natural instinct when a friend is roasting from sun and Ecstasy? Lots of water.

After the Pomona festival two weeks ago, several Los Angeles physicians are calling for an end to raves. But even at this point, that seems like a “Footloose”-town-style reaction. Music and dance aren’t dangerous.

But a lack of knowledge can be deadly.