



FLUNITRAZEPAM (ROHYPNOL®)

Flunitrazepam, which is marketed under the brand name Rohypnol and is commonly known as *roofies*, belongs to the benzodiazepine class of drugs. Flunitrazepam has never been approved for medical use in the United States, therefore, doctors cannot prescribe it and pharmacists cannot sell it. However, it is legally prescribed in over 50 other countries and is widely available in Mexico, Colombia, and Europe where it is used for the treatment of insomnia and as a pre-anesthetic. Therefore, it was placed into Schedule IV of the Controlled Substances Act in 1984 due to international treaty obligations and remains under that classification. Like other benzodiazepines (such as Valium, Librium, Xanax, and Halcion), flunitrazepam's pharmacological effects include sedation, muscle relaxation, reduction in anxiety, and prevention of convulsions. However, flunitrazepam's sedative effects are approximately 7 to 10 times more potent than diazepam (Valium). The effects of flunitrazepam appear approximately 15 to 20 minutes after administration and last approximately four to six hours. Some residual effects can be found 12 hours or more after administration.

Flunitrazepam causes partial amnesia; individuals are unable to remember certain events that they experienced while under the influence of the drug. This effect is particularly dangerous when flunitrazepam is used to aid in the commission of sexual assault; victims may not be able to clearly recall the assault, the assailant, or the events surrounding the assault.

It is difficult to estimate just how many flunitrazepam-facilitated rapes have occurred in the United States. Very often, biological samples are taken from the victim at a time when the effects of the drug have already passed and only residual amounts remain in the body fluids. These residual amounts are difficult, if not impossible, to detect using standard screening assays available in the United States. If flunitrazepam exposure is to be detected at all, urine samples need to be collected within 72 hours and subjected to sensitive analytical tests. The problem is compounded by the onset of amnesia after ingestion of the drug, which causes the victim to be uncertain about the facts surrounding the rape. This uncertainty may lead to critical delays or even reluctance to report the rape and to provide appropriate biological samples for toxicology testing.

While flunitrazepam has become widely known for its use as a date-rape drug, it is abused more frequently for other reasons. It is abused by high school students, college students, street gang members, rave party attendees, and heroin and cocaine abusers to produce profound intoxication, boost the high of heroin, and modulate the effects of cocaine. Flunitrazepam is usually consumed orally, is often combined with alcohol, and is abused by crushing tablets and snorting the powder.

Flunitrazepam abuse causes a number of adverse effects in the abuser, including drowsiness, dizziness, loss of motor control, lack of coordination, slurred speech, confusion, and gastrointestinal disturbances, lasting 12 or more hours. Higher doses produce respiratory depression. Chronic use of flunitrazepam can result in physical dependence and the appearance of withdrawal syndrome when the drug is discontinued. Flunitrazepam impairs cognitive and psychomotor functions affecting reaction time and driving skill. The use of this drug in combination with alcohol is a particular concern as both substances potentiate each other's toxicity.