Ecstasy legal but dangerous to body

SHREVEPORT, La. (AP) — Users describe the drug in glowing terms — an aphrodisiac, a mood elevator, a mind expander. It's legal, but medical authorities say it does some bad things to a person's body.

Technically, the drug is methylenedioxy-methamphetamine. It's also called Ecstasy or just X. One hit — which users say lasts as long as six hours — costs $15 to $20.

It's just different enough from the illegal methamphetamine to pass muster.

Amateur chemists make it in their garages and basements. Police raided a laboratory across from a high school in Shreveport recently and found materials and equipment believed to have been used to produce the illegal methamphetamine.

But Jim Hawkins of the DEA said that by "stopping one step short" of producing the illegal drug the chemist could have produced Ecstasy.

Hawkins said the drug has the same basic effects as methamphetamine.

Newsweek said in a story last week that the drug has not received FDA approval, but it is being used by a handful of psychiatrists and therapists who feel it helps break down inhibitions, enhances repressed memories and generally allows patients to experience greater "personal growth."

Some are less impressed with the drug. "It's dangerous as it can be," Hawkins said.

"It's a relatively new drug, and with it you can see an increase in blood pressure, body temperature, hallucinations and possible widespread spasms of the blood vessels," said Roma Pearson, executive director of the Northwest Louisiana Crime Lab.

Dr. Newell McElwee, managing director of the poison control center at LSU Medical School here, said the drug should be restricted.

"From the symptoms written to me with the use of this drug, it needs to be described as a Schedule I drug," McElwee said.

"Any drug that causes these symptoms has no place in medicine. They start injecting this stuff, it's going to create a nightmare," Hawkins said.

One user, a 24-year-old college graduate who owns a construction firm, described the feeling he experienced when using Ecstasy as "euphoric."

"All six of your senses feel opened up and more receptive," he said. "Yes, six senses. Ecstasy opens up an undiscovered sixth sense that can only be tapped by Ecstasy."

Aphrodisiac properties also have been ascribed to the drug. "It enhances touch and emotions. You can make love all night when you take it," the user said.

"I've used Ecstasy about once a week for about the past five months. And I've never experienced any bad side effects. When you wake up in the morning after doing it, you feel great."

A second user, a 25-year-old Shreveport businessman, echoed those feelings.

"Taking Ecstasy gives you a feeling of positive thinking. And you get much closer to the people you love," he said.

A 24-year-old college graduate who now works as a salesman, said he had tried the drug "once or twice" and that the drug had been available in Shreveport since October.

"The high lasts from six to eight hours, and you have no craving for alcohol," he said.

The drug has been described as a "Yuppie" phenomenon, and the users are usually men and women in their 20s with "good jobs."

McElwee said the long-term effects of the drug are unknown.

"There is very little in the medical literature about this drug. We haven't any good information on it," he said.