

Date Rape Coasters

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In the next thirty days, as we scramble to write papers, attend classes, and survive tournaments, 6,000 men and women will fight to survive violent assault. Today, as we compete in or judge various events, 200 men and women will compete with assailants for their lives. And this hour, as we listen to each other, 8 men and women will pray for someone to hear-and save them. The sad thing about these statistics is that they're probably not even true. Not true, because the number is probably far greater than we can, or even want, to imagine. These statistics represent the number of people assaulted with the aid of date rape drugs, which, in 2000, the U.S. Department of Justice found were responsible for the fastest-growing drug-facilitated sexual assault crimes in America. In my speech today, I'll give you the straight dope about date rape drugs, and then slip you information about the newest devices being developed to combat them. Finally, we'll wake up to the implications of these technologies.

First, the straight dope about date rape drugs. At CNN.com, the section on date rape drugs is headed: "Drugs and rape: an old problem with a new face." That new face can be found in over 36 drugs, with more being developed every day. The three most infamous, however, are, flunitrazepam, also called Rohypnol, "roofies" or "roaches," Ketamine, also known as "K", "Vitamin K" or "Special K," and gamma-hydroxybutyrate which has a host of names including, GHB, "Easy Lay," "Georgia Home Boy," "G" or "Liquid E,." All these drugs are ideal for sexual predators because they render their victims defenseless. The drugs themselves are colorless and odorless, either in powder, pill, or liquid form, which makes them easy to add into someone's drink. Moreover, all of them leave the system quickly, within 72 hours, taking the evidence of the crime away faster, in many cases, than the victim can report it.

And all these victims are not women. The Department of Justice found that one in every ten victims are men. A federal task force recently estimated that college drinking leads to 70,000 sexual assaults annually. The problem with any of these statistics is, of course, that rape is the silencing predator, especially for men, who are less likely to report their rapists. For both men and women, law enforcement agents estimate that less than 30% of rapes are reported, perhaps as few as 10%. However, whether the statistic is 70, 000 or 700, 000 it is staggering, and demands action.

That being said, sit back and relax as I slip you information on the latest date rape drug technologies. One product, the Guardian Angel test kit, is available off the Internet. Creators Charlyne Cutler and Alissa Garcia of Las Vegas developed strips which, when dipped in drinks, can detect GHB in 10 to 15 seconds. While \$5.00 is a small price to pay for peace of mind, there are even more affordable options to assure drinking safety. A less expensive option is the Drink Safe Coaster. The concept of the coaster was developed by

Francisco Guerra, after a friend told him about her own experience with date rape. He and a partner, Brian Glover, developed the small cardboard squares, which were named as one of the best inventions of 2002 in Time Magazine. The coasters, about the size of a credit card, have two areas on which drinks can be tested. According to the drink safe website at www.drinksafetech.com, "the test takes only seconds to perform, and is as easy as placing a couple of drops from the drink in question onto the active test spots using a swizzle stick or even one's finger." Should the spots turn blue, the drink has been tampered with. Perhaps one of the most advantageous aspects to this solution is its price. The coasters are available on the Internet for only .40 apiece. The company also offers companies or organizations the opportunity to personalize the coasters. Groups such as the Santa Clara YWCA have personalized the coasters before handing them out. According to the BBC online, a new date rape drug-detecting device is in the works in the UK, because of the rising number of date-rape cases there. It is a swizzle stick that is left in a drink, which would change color if the drink were drugged at any point in time. The goal is to make the sticks cheaply enough that they would be served with all drinks.

There are, of course, problems with the date-rape drug detecting technologies. As small as the products are, they are generating a disproportionate amount of controversy. The first issue is whether the devices really work. Guardian Angel's effectiveness is limited to one drug, GHB, and the Drink Safe coasters are only effective for two: GHB and Ketamine. With the large number of drugs already on the market, and those being developed, DEA spokeswoman Rogen Waite says, "In cases where there are scientific advances, the bad guys get around it faster than the good guys can." Besides the limitations placed on the coasters by the relatively few number of drugs they detect, they also can only detect drugs in certain drinks. For instance, the coasters can only detect GHB in Apple Juice, Grape Fruit Juice, Orange Juice, or Cranberry Juice when the concentration of the drug is high, higher than is usually used by predators. Finally, the most dangerous aspect of the date rape coasters and strips is the possibility that they create a false sense of security. Even if these new technologies work, someone can always put something in a drink after it's tested. The danger of these new devices is that they could cause people to forget that there is no substitute for old-fashioned vigilance.

On the other hand, the coasters and strips could work. The Drink Safe website boasts a 95% success rate. Although it is true that the coasters and strips only test for a small number of drugs, the drugs they test for are the most prevalent ones being used, and being able to detect one or two drugs is more than what could be done just four years ago. Guerra compares his coasters to condoms: the coasters are not 100% effective, but they're a good prevention tool. But perhaps the greatest benefit to the drink safe coasters and like products is increased awareness. These products's creation, and the accompanying controversy, brought attention to the very real problem that is date rape drugs. The coasters themselves, help increase awareness. Fort Lauderdale Police Detective John Ligouri says that, "It's not foolproof, but it serves as a good educational tool." He adds, "People are very receptive to taking them, People are curious."

This curiosity has led to new versions of the date rape coaster, and the reinforcing of basic drinking safety rules. Marea Stamper, from the University of Louisville's Women's Center helped design a less high-tech drink coaster. It is solely a warning for potential victims of date rape drugs, as well as predators. The coasters are bright pink (so that they show up in black lights). On the front they read: "Drink Safe, Watch Your Drink because right now somebody may be watching it for you." On the backside they say: "Date rape drugs can be anywhere! Throw away any drink that tastes salty or "funny" quickly. Never leave your drink unattended. Don't take a drink from a punchbowl. Never accept any drink from a stranger. 80% of all sexual assaults involve one or both the parties being intoxicated. If you suspect that you or a friend has been drugged, don't wait!" It then lists a number of numbers that can be called.

Whether using a date-rape coaster or not, it's important to remember the suggestions listed on Stamper's coaster. In addition, go out with a friend. Keep an eye on each other! Also, know where your drink is coming from. Be careful about taking drinks from people you don't know. Should any of these precautions fail, pay attention to what you're drinking! Intense flavors often mask GHB. Trinka Porrata of the nonprofit group Project GHB cautions "beware if you're drinking wine, and [someone] wants to convert you to a sweet or fruity drink." Also, pay attention to how you feel. If you get drunk extremely fast, feel extremely sick or black out, your drink might have been tampered with. If any of these things happen to you, be sure to tell someone and report it to the authorities.

In my speech today I've given you the straight dope about date rape drugs, then slipped you information on the newest devices being developed to combat them, and finally we woke up to the implications of these technologies. Most important, however, I've shown you the prevalence with which date rape drugs are used, and reiterated the need for basic drinking safety.

Whether not date rape coasters, or similar technologies, are the solution to the mammoth problem of date rape drugs remains an issue in the air. However, there is no doubt that date rape drugs are a frightening problem that must be addressed. With the arrival of these little pieces of cardboard, we now have the ability to combat them more effectively. Whether their success rate is 95% or significantly less, it remains a fact that their mere presence means that people are thinking about what they are drinking. If increased awareness of date rape drugs is the only benefit to these devices perhaps that should be more than enough. After all, .40 isn't much to pay for piece of mind.

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