



ROCIC Publications /Special Research Report

TOPIC: **PURPLE DRANK**

Sipping sweet purple syrup from a foam cup to slow your roll may not be the most alarming aspect of the current opiate epidemic, but the trend among teenagers and young adults has been accelerating due to hip-hop culture, social media, and popular misconceptions about prescription medicines.

We're talking about drinking codeine, an opiate which can be prescribed as a legitimate cough suppressant but when abused can cause extreme side effects, addiction, and even death.

The cocktail is known as "lean," "sizzurp," "drank," "purp," "barre," or simply "syrup." The trend began in Houston, Texas (now known as Syrup City) and has spread, especially throughout the South, through the hip-hop culture and rap recordings.

The kind of cough syrup sipped by rappers and their followers has three active ingredients—codeine, the world's most-widely used opiate, which triggers the same brain receptors as heroin; promethazine, an antihistamine that can make a person tired; and alcohol. The Food and Drug Administration guidelines call for one teaspoon every four hours, no more than six doses in a day, with further consumption leading to a high.



Users typically mix an ounce of the syrup with Sprite, a sports drink or a regional soft drink called Big Red, then plop in a Jolly Rancher candy for sweetness and pour it over ice in a Styrofoam cup. Sipping it results in a "swooning euphoria" and wooziness, and over time, addiction. Enough syrup can slow one's heart rate, depress the respiratory system, or trigger brain seizures. Other effects include pinpoint pupils, raspy voice, slurred speech, uncontrolled eye movement, droopy eyes, loss of balance and coordination, paleness, constipation, and urinary tract infection.

At least three popular rap stars ("codeine cowboys") have died in recent years from codeine overdoses or medical complications arising from their abuse of codeine.

"No one realizes that lean is liquid heroin," Houston rapper OG Maco said in a news article. "I hate lean."



ROCIC Publications / Special Research Report

TOPIC: PURPLE DRANK

But another Houston user also stated in a news article: “Here (in Houston) it’s not stigmatized in the least, and in fact, it’s largely endorsed. If you aren’t sipping purple, you aren’t buying into the (hip-hop) culture.” Another user noted, “... most people are drinking the Hi-Tech red, Wockhardt green, and Qualitest. Those are the choices you have right now.”

In 2014, the DEA claimed that one in 10 teens abused codeine cough syrups in this way to get high. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) reported in 2008 that 3 million adolescents and young adults, mostly between the ages of 12 and 25, had used cough or cold medicines to get high; this number included those using codeine-based cough syrup and over-the-counter DXM drugs.

Codeine is an opiate and a Schedule III drug that requires a doctor’s prescription, while dextromethorphan (DXM), a safer substitute, is sold over the counter. (See sidebar on Lemon Drop.)

Between 2004 and 2011, hospital visits involving codeine-based cough syrup spiked 286 percent, according to SAMSHA.



In May 2016, authorities reported six middle-school students in Montgomery County, Maryland ended up in the hospital after they drank a mixture of alcohol, candy, and over-the-counter cold medicine. “They had just general sickness after ingesting an unknown quantity of this mixture,” said a first-responder spokesman. “They had some nausea and upset stomachs, things of that nature.” Police said teenagers throughout the Washington, D.C. region are experimenting with these types of cocktail mixtures and worse.

“It’s coming from a lot of rap music and other popular culture,” said Eddie Atkins, program director for the Riverside Treatment Center in Southeast D.C. “A lot of the use of lean or sizzurp, it’s coming from the Houston rap music called screwed and chopped.”

A woman in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, told police that her infant had become sick after inadvertently sipping on some unattended “lean” at a local residence they were visiting.

Ronald Peters, a retired professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center, traces lean’s roots back to the 1950s when Houstonian bluesmen mixed syrup with beer. Mixers evolved to wine coolers, and later soda, to mask the taste. It was easy to get with a doctor’s prescription, and cheap with an insurance card. It became so readily available, Peters said, that “it was normalized, like going to a bar.”



ROCIC Publications / Special Research Report

TOPIC: PURPLE DRANK

Robert Earl Davis, Jr., a mixtape legend who went by DJ Screw, invented a turntable technique called “chopped and screwed” in which he slowed the speed of a song—distorting the sound as if one were spinning a 45 record at 33 revolutions per minute—and sold the remixes. The rappers closest to DJ Screw formed a collective, called the Screwed Up Click, and together they cultivated a sound that, for many, emulated the slowed-down effects of syrup.

According to Max Blau, author of the online *Fusion* article “How Lean Became Hip-Hop’s Heroin”:

“Soon, syrup seeped out of Texas into the rest of the South. Barre, the street name for prescription syrup made by Barr Pharmaceuticals, became the gold standard. It was cheap in 1993: A bottle cost roughly \$100 and a two-ounce dose ran roughly \$20. By the decade’s end, the drug influenced Southern hip-hop in a way that resembled the effects LSD had on 1960s rock, heroin on 1970s punk, and molly on modern EDM. In 1999, Houston rapper Big Moe recorded *City of Syrup*, a purple-drunk concept album with songs named Barre Baby and Leanin. Pimp C, one-half of Houston rap duo UGK, rapped about “sipping daily” on Jay-Z’s hit, *Big Pimpin*. But Three Six Mafia effectively introduced the drug to the world with its 2000 anthem, *Sippin’ on Some Syrup*. The same year sipping went mainstream, DJ Screw died at 29 from a codeine overdose.”

According to Peters, the codeine craze reached a new level when Houstonians were buying more cold medicine in the summer than in the winter.

Syrup drinks appeared in Pensacola, Fla., as early as 1999 as a social drink among drug dealers. The popularity of purple drank seemed to increase significantly around 2006.

The popularity of purple drank and high-energy drinks spawned the creation of “extreme relaxation beverages” that contain legal ingredients such as melatonin, valerian root extract, and kava kava. The slogan for selling the grape-flavored product is *Slow Your Roll*. One such carbonated beverage was sold in a purple can in Houston and called *Drank*. Another legal drink was known as *Purple Stuff*. Reportedly, sales of *Drank* have dropped so much that it is now available only in select stores in Houston and Saginaw, Michigan. At a mental health conference in February 2010, Professor Peters, of the UT Health Science Center said of *Drank*: “They’re taking the name, and they’re trying to market it to young people.” He described the beverage as “the worst thing I’ve ever seen on the street

Lemon Drop

Lemon Drop is the name given to a homemade hallucinogenic drug produced by mixing a painter’s solvent (Naphtha with ammonia) and over-the-counter drugs, such as Robitussin Cough Syrup, Sucrets or Vicks Formula 44. Lighter fluid can be used to replace Naphtha, but is usually not preferred by users due to leaving a bad aftertaste. Once the Naphtha or lighter fluid is mixed with the over-the-counter cough syrup, the mixture is heated to extract the DXM (Dextromethorphan) from those drugs. Next, the byproduct of this process is mixed with either lemon juice or Country Time powdered lemonade mix and cooled, which causes the juice/lemonade and DXM to bond together, hence the “lemon drop” name. Lemonade is used if the lemon drop product is to be ingested orally and real lemon juice is required if the lemon drop product is to be swallowed via capsule form. DXM abuse has been a long running form of legal high and various recipes to extract DXM have been published. The mixture can be found offered for sale on retailing sites or personal sales ads.



ROCIC Publications / Special Research Report

TOPIC: PURPLE DRANK

since the making of candy cigarettes.”

A 2014 study found that codeine references more than tripled in rap songs between 2000 and 2007. Universal Records released official chopped and screwed remixes of its archives. Artists including Big Moe, Mike Jones, Lil’ Flip, and Paul Wall made frequent syrup references en route to critical and popular acclaim. Lil’ Wayne, a well-known sipper who’s struggled with addiction, raised the profile of the drug, with songs like Me and My Drank, and landed in the hospital following a 2013 seizure believed to be the result of leaning.

According to the Max Blau article: “The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration’s figures show that one in 10 American teenagers have sipped either over-the-counter or prescription syrup. Reportedly, dealers are tinkering with homemade lean recipes made from pure codeine and promethazine, mixed with corn syrup and purple coloring.”

DEA agents said the demand for illicit syrup has sent its price soaring. Syrup that typically sells for \$12 a pint that is stolen or obtained illegally from pharmacies and warehouses often is sold to street dealers for about \$300 a pint, according to a DEA agent in Tyler, Texas, in a news article. He said East Texas dealers then sell it by the ounce to users for \$40 to \$85, or \$640 to \$1,360 a pint.

The cost of Actavis (a premium brand on the street) skyrocketed to where a single pint of cough syrup cost upwards of \$3,000. The shortage made codeine-promethazine syrup worthy of larceny — Lab technicians stole 110 gallons of prescription syrup from an Atlanta hospital; an 18-person crime ring filled prescriptions with a San Diego doctor’s stolen pad; and three men allegedly robbed the drug from dozens of Miami-area pharmacies in a year’s time.

Investigators in Georgia found that technicians at Emory University Hospital Midtown in Atlanta had diverted 110 gallons of promethazine codeine to the street from 2008 to 2013, leading to a \$200,000 fine, according to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. (The hospital told the newspaper it had

SIZZURP DETOX

According to American Addiction Centers, the best approach to detox is to work with a medical professional to withdraw safely from the substance if it’s used regularly. The supervising doctor may use small doses of benzodiazepines if the primary addiction involves alcohol, or they may prescribe buprenorphine if the addiction primarily involves codeine.

People who are detoxing from opioid addiction may experience pain as a symptom. The supervising physician may use over-the-counter painkillers in specific doses to ease this issue. Clonidine is sometimes used off-label to treat opioid withdrawal symptoms, especially nausea and loss of appetite.

Once detox has been successfully completed, the individual must enter a rehabilitation program. These programs provide group and individual therapy, as well as family therapy and other complementary treatments, to help the person mend relationships, understand addiction, and deal with triggers or stress in a more successful, sober manner.

Treatment is extremely important because purple drank, sizzurp, lean, syrup, and similar concoctions are all very dangerous. Continued use can quickly lead to addiction and overdose. Fortunately, there are many adolescent, young adult, and adult rehabilitation programs that can help people struggling with this addiction.



ROCIC Publications /Special Research Report

TOPIC: **PURPLE DRANK**

systems in place to prevent such thefts, which it had strengthened in the wake of the revelations.)

In October 2011, the DEA cracked a smuggling ring that used its own renegade pharmacies to purchase 97,000 pints of prescription-strength cough syrup (1.5 million doses) and smuggle them from California to Houston, profitting to the tune of \$10 million, according to the *Houston Chronicle*.

An unsubstantiated report has the Mexican cartels manufacturing a copy of the discontinued Actavis brand under the new name Actavisa. Produced in Guadalajara, it is supposedly smuggled in fruit trucks across the border into Texas, where it is driven to California and sold on the black market.

In 2011, the most recent year for which data are available, codeine (in all forms) was the reported cause of 11,000 U.S. emergency room visits, according to the Department of Health and Human Services. A 2013 study of more than 2,300 college students in the Southeast found that at least 6.5 percent had experienced syrup. That same year the U.S. government's National Institute on Drug Abuse said promethazine codeine cough syrup had become "increasingly popular among youth in several areas of the country."

According to a *Houston Press* article by Wayon O'Day in October 2016:

"DJ Screw's Screwed Up Click, or S.U.C., boasted a roster of other notorious drank-sippers like Big Moe, Z-Ro and H.A.W.K., who also glorified the use of lean in their music. Since the 1960s, sipping drank had been a largely localized epidemic, but that dynamic began to change as the popularity of the genre dubbed chopped and screwed increased. Screw began to remix music from artists outside of Houston, which opened up a new market for the Houston brand of hip-hop, as well as lean.

"A huge turning point in the lean culture in hip-hop came in February 2000 with the release of Three Six Mafia's *Sippin' On Some Sizzurp*, which featured UGK, the Port Arthur, Texas, duo of Bun B and Pimp C. The song found nationwide airplay, alerting all corners of the country to the trend that had reached epidemic proportions in the South. Eight months later, in his studio bathroom, DJ Screw was found dead at 29 years old from a heart attack."

A\$AP Yams, co-founder of New York hip-hop collective A\$AP Mob and a well-publicized user of codeine and Xanax, died in January 2015. New York's Chief Medical Examiner's office ruled his death an accidental drug overdose due to opiates and benzodiazepine.

In October 2007, Big Moe, another Screw acolyte, died, suffering a heart attack that put him into a coma at age 33. Moe was a huge proponent of purple drank, naming his first two albums *City of Syrup* and *Purple World*, the latter of which reached as high as No. 3 on the U.S. R&B/Hip-Hop charts. Although Moe's death was not attributed to a codeine overdose, one can speculate that his heart attack could have been due to long-term use of the concoction, whose side effects include bloating and constipation, which in turn can cause increased weight gain and stress on the cardiopulmonary system.

In December 2007, well-known sipper Pimp C died at age 33 following an accidental overdose that exacerbated the side effects of his sleep apnea.



ROCIC Publications / Special Research Report

TOPIC: PURPLE DRANK



SIZZURP CASUALTIES



Despite the deaths, in July 2015, the rap artist Future followed up *Beast Mode* with his bestselling full-length, *Dirty Sprite 2*, a prominent nod to lean that went platinum in a year's time.

In early 2015, OG Maco had seen syrup's influence hit closer to home when police arrested his labelmates Quavo and Offset, two-thirds of hip-hop trio Migos, after finding a cache of guns and drugs, including a bottle of lean, in a pair of vehicles parked at Georgia Southern University. Facing multiple felonies, they pleaded guilty to lesser charges.

Some rappers are talking against lean. Detroit rapper Danny Brown claimed his main reason for quitting was the weight gain he was experiencing owing to an increased intake of sugar from the soda and the Jolly Rancher candies that are commonly mixed with the codeine-promethazine syrup.

Another notable former sipper is Gucci Mane, now known as Boosie Badazz, who was recently released from federal prison. Back in 2013, Gucci addressed his

A Select Drankography

"You can find me on them Screw CDs talkin' about / 'Purple Stuff' Purple stuff! (Purrrrr-pulllll) Purple stuff"
Purple Stuff

—Big Moe (of Screwed Up Click)

"Mama leave 'em with a trace of Mo-E / And promethazine and yeah the codeine fiend"

Me and My Drank

—Lil Wayne

"Forty dollars for just one ounce ounce, plus / Tussionex is how it's pronounced"

Sippin' On Some Syrup

—Three 6 Mafia

"Two cups of the muddy, I swerve on 'em / Actavis, Actavis wait on it / Actavis, Actavis wait on it"

I Don't Play About My Paper

—DJ Khaled

"Dibble dabble with the lean / Hi-Tech with the cream soda / As I whipped the yola / Lambo red, Coca Cola"
Yamborghini High

—A\$AP Mob

"You know, I'm on one / Two white cups and I got that drink, it could be purple, it could be pink"

Trust Issues

—Justin Bieber, covering Drake



ROCIC Publications / Special Research Report

TOPIC: **PURPLE DRANK**

addiction to the substance on Twitter, saying he had been sipping for more than a decade and it had “destroyed” him, claiming he had lost memory of many of the things he did and said under the influence of the drug. He said that he had nearly died three or four times because of the drug.

Promethazine codeine cough syrup began its rise in 1952, when a company called Ani Pharmaceuticals applied to the Food and Drug Administration for approval of what was originally known as “Phenergan expectorant with codeine.” The formulation paired promethazine, an antihistamine developed in France in the 1940s, with a painkiller that had been in use for more than a century. After a winding regulatory path, promethazine codeine was declared safe and effective by the FDA in 1984.

Dr. David Corry, chief of the Immunology, Allergy, and Rheumatology section at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, said the idea is to block with one drug the major symptoms of allergies. “The codeine covers the cough; the promethazine covers everything else.” The problem with the combination, he added, are the severe side effects, which include “altered mental status.”

By 2013 at least seven pharmaceutical companies—Actavis and Wockhardt, plus Pharmaceutical Associates (now defunct), Hi-Tech (now owned by Akorn Pharmaceuticals), Nostrum Laboratories, Tris Pharma, and Amneal Pharmaceuticals—had received approval for at least 27 different promethazine codeine products, according to FDA records.

Over the years, Actavis’s Prometh With Codeine formulation and its distinctive orange-and-white label had remained largely unchanged, and the liquid became the “purple standard” on the streets. Or the pink standard, rather: It was known, as the hip-hop artist 2 Chainz pointed out in a 2016 interview with WorldstarHipHop, for turning pink when mixed. Actavis pulled the product from the market in 2014.



ROCIC Publications / Special Research Report

TOPIC: PURPLE DRANK

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DRANK

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Effects of Purple Drank Abuse



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