Hey Alice!

My friends and I did shrooms the other night and they mentioned "peyote." I was wondering, what is "peyote"? What does it do to you? And what are the side effects? Thanks!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Peyote, a small spineless cactus (*Lophophora williamsii*), has been used for many years for its hallucinogenic properties. The plant contains mescaline, the main active ingredient, which produces the hallucinatory effect (more on other effects in a bit). Usually, the crown of the peyote plant is cut off and then dried. It is then either chewed or the dried cacti are soaked in water to create a hallucinogenic liquid. Some may also boil the cacti for hours to make a tea (for a less bitter taste). Mescaline can be synthesized as well.

The U.S. government classifies peyote and mescaline as schedule I (one) controlled substances, and it is illegal. That being said, it has long been used by Native American societies in what is now Mexico and the southwestern United States, and is native to both of these regions. The drug has been a part of Native American religious ceremonies for a long time now and continues to be used today by the Native American Church, the only organization exempt from federal law regarding use of peyote.

So, what does it do? Mescaline, like other hallucinogens, can distort your perception of reality. Those who use peyote may see or hear things that are not real. With peyote, a 0.3-0.5 gram dose leads to hallucinations which can take up to four hours to reach their peak, and can last up to 12 hours after ingesting the drug. To read a famous literary description of a mescaline trip, you can peruse *Miserable Miracle* (1956) by French Surrealist poet and artist Henri Michaux, in which he describes, in words and pictures, his experiences with mescaline. As indicated by the title, users can find the experience pleasing and also, well, miserable.

Reader, you asked about the side-effects. According to the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](http://www.drugabuse.gov) (NIDA), possible effects of peyote use include:

- Increased heart rate
- Increased body temperature
- Excessive sweating and flushing
- Ataxia (uncoordinated body movements)
Fetal abnormalities (though more research is needed on possible effects on the fetus)

Deaths directly related to mescaline use are uncommon. Any injuries or deaths are more likely to be a result of accidents that occur because of the distorted perception that is the drug's major effect. Research on peyote effects on Native Americans did not find cognitive or psychological impairment, but these findings cannot necessarily be generalized to those who use peyote recreationally (rather than strictly in religious ceremonies). Other studies have examined potential beneficial effects of hallucinogens for medical purposes. There is some early evidence that drugs like peyote may help those struggling to overcome addiction and substance abuse, but further research is needed.

If you do decide to try peyote or mescaline, consider the safety of the space you use in and make sure someone who is not using the drug is around to help you if you need it. For more information on hallucinogenic drugs, check out the Go Ask Alice! LSD, PCP, & Other Hallucinogens category in the Alcohol & Other Drug archives.

Alice!
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If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

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