Psilocybin ('magic') mushrooms

Hi Alice,

I have been thinking of trying psilocybin mushrooms. Please tell me what effects it has on the brain, body, and whatever else you can tell me... I have heard shrooms are safer than LSD and even that shrooms are harmless!!! Also tell me if it is common that shrooms are laced with LSD. Thanx and I love your site!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Why, thank you! Glad you like the site. Now, time to get right down to the fungi facts:

Psilocybin mushrooms (a.k.a. 'shrooms or "magic" mushrooms) are a hallucinogen that can be eaten as a fresh or dried mushroom and added to food, brewed in tea, or swallowed in the form of a capsule or tablet. These mushrooms can have different effects depending on the amount consumed — reactions range from muscle relaxation and hallucinations to panic attacks and impaired memory. While psilocybin mushrooms don't generally cause life-threatening physical reactions, they aren't exactly harmless. Each person's trip is different and with the number of psilocybin mushrooms out there (at least 75 varieties have psilocybin or a closely related substance, psilocyn), it may be difficult to determine which ones are toxic and which ones are safe. And about 'shrooms versus lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD)? while they are both hallucinogens and it is true that sometimes these fungi may indeed be laced with other substances including LSD, one isn't necessarily safer than the other.

The term "hallucinogen" means that taking this substance causes the user to experience an altered sense of reality, a.k.a. "tripping." This is caused by an initial interruption in the interactions of nerve cells and the neurotransmitter serotonin. While on smaller doses of psilocybin, individuals may feel a sense of detachment from their body and observing themselves, see brilliant arrangements of color and light, or see fantastical images. If a larger amount is consumed, users may experience physical sensations, such as lightheadedness, shivering or sweating, nausea, and anxiety, and numbness of the tongue, lips, and mouth. Use of this drug can also change a user's perception of time, making minutes seem like hours. However, if a user experiences anxiety or fear during a trip (often described as having a "bad trip"), the body's reactions to these feelings may be difficult to handle. There are also synthetic forms of psilocybin and psilocin, but they tend to be less common because of the cost and difficulty of producing them. The synthetic 'shrooms produce similar effects as their natural counterparts, but the "trip" associated with the former variety tends to be more
predictable. In any case, for those considering 'shrooms, it may be good to think about where and with whom you're experimenting. Using harm reduction strategies, like being in an environment that feels safe with trusted friends (who aren't using any substances), is also a good idea.

An individual's experience with this drug can vary widely, based on a number of different factors. A person's expectations, physical and emotional health, previous drug experiences, mood, the amount of the drug consumed, and the setting contribute to the drug's effects. In addition, pre-existing mental health concerns, such as depression, or interactions with other drugs, can cause unpredictable reactions to this type of mushroom. Hallucinations range from the intriguing and pleasurable to the frightening and anxiety-producing. Some bad "trips" may be physically and emotionally uncomfortable, and the memory may stay with the user for a long time?it can even cause flashbacks of trips among frequent users. Psilocybin mushrooms aren't considered addictive and most users decide for themselves when they're done experimenting. That being said, 'shrooms can have some undesirable long-term effects including impaired memory and possible tolerance, both to psilocybin and other hallucinogens such as LSD and phenylclidine (PCP) [2].

If you're considering experimenting with this type of drug, it's definitely worth mentioning that the psilocybin variety of mushrooms may be difficult to identify?whether in the wild or dried form. There are similar-looking fungi that cause hallucinations, but choosing the wrong one can be deadly. In fact, taking toxic mushrooms by accident is considered one of the single most dangerous factors about 'shroom use.

Reader, you also ask about the safety of psilocybin mushrooms in comparison to LSD [3]: 'shrooms and LSD may have similar effects; however, LSD's effects last longer. While it's unlikely that LSD itself would be mixed with other drugs, there's no way of knowing what combination of chemicals makes up street LSD. As for 'shrooms, it also could be the case that they may be marketed as psilocybin, but are actually store-bought mushrooms laced with LSD or PCP.

For more information on hallucinogens and other drugs, check out the Go Ask Alice! Alcohol & Other Drugs [4] archives, there's even a specific section dedication to LSD, PCP & Other Hallucinogens [5]! Another helpful resource is National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) [6], which contains usage statistics and links to fact sheets and publications. Lastly, if a good time is what you're after, there are plenty of ways to have a blast without taking substances?check out Fun without Drugs? [7] and Natural highs [8] for some inspiration!

Alice!
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Resources

Columbia Health BASICS program (Morningside)
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