

# BEWARE THE HERBAL HIGH

Mephedrone, magic mushrooms, salvia, 'Bushman's ecstasy' – these herbal drugs may be 'natural' but that doesn't mean they're harmless. By Helen Grange

The first time 28-year-old events manager Andrea\* took magic mushrooms was at a New Year's party. 'It was great. I felt as uninhibited as a child and I had mild hallucinations,' she says. But the second time she took 'shrooms' she felt frightened for most of the duration of their effect. 'I had somehow wandered away from my friends and couldn't find them again. Suddenly I was overwhelmed with fear and a profound sense of aloneness. It was horrible and took ages to wear off,' she says.

Stories such as Andrea's are common among young women who've dabbled with 'herbal highs' to heighten their party or clubbing experiences. But even stories of unpleasant effects haven't generally led people to regard such drugs as 'serious', and certainly not as potentially lethal.

That changed when two teenagers in the UK, Nicholas Smith, 19, and Louis Wainwright, 18, recently died after taking mephedrone, known as MCAT or meow-meow – then a legal drug there – after drinking all night. Mephedrone is a synthetic form of cathinone, the active ingredient found in khat (*catha edulis*), a plant indigenous to East Africa that is traditionally chewed or brewed into

tea. Because it's in a concentrated form – either in pills, capsules or white powder – the effects of mephedrone are stronger than those of khat.

Such was the brouhaha that ensued after the deaths of Smith and Wainwright that mephedrone was banned in the UK in April. (But already manufacturers have concocted a new formula to skirt the law. Called 'sub-coca dragon', it produces a similar high to that of mephedrone.)

After the deaths, several people came forward to describe the frightening experiences they'd had with mephedrone – a drug they'd assumed was benign because it was legal.

Amy Crown, 23, a waitress from London, told *Grazia* magazine she'd taken the drug in powder form while out drinking with her friends. 'Within 10 minutes my heart started beating faster but instead of feeling a buzz, I felt on edge. I thought a drink might calm my nerves and dull the paranoia, but after a vodka I felt sick and disorientated.'

Crown said she then collapsed, 'shivering violently', before lapsing into unconsciousness and waking up in hospital a few hours later.

'Mephedrone is a stimulant, so like cocaine it gives you a high – you feel excited, talkative and alert – but it can also bring on nausea, nosebleeds and hallucinations,' says Carol du Toit, director of the South African National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence in Durban.

## LEGAL ISN'T ALWAYS LEKKER

Although khat – along with marijuana, magic mushrooms and laboratory-synthesised narcotics – is illegal in South Africa, mephedrone is not listed as an illegal drug. Some of it has made its way here, says Du Toit, having been ordered by South Africans via UK websites that offer to send the drug for about R114 a gram, plus postage.

Other plants that yield mind-altering chemicals – such as *salvia divinorum* (diviner's sage), *trichocereus*

*pachanoi* (San Pedro cactus), *lophophora williamsii* (peyote cactus) and *sceletium tortuosum* ('Bushman's ecstasy') – are also not prohibited in terms of South Africa's Drugs and Drug Trafficking Act, so buying and possessing these are not illegal.

Adding to the sense that these are not 'serious drugs' is the fact that many of them can be bought online using a credit card – which means you don't even need to know who your drug merchant is. An unbranded package arrives by post – simple.

But the reality is that some of these drugs can be just as dangerous as their illegal counterparts, and addictive too.

## PARTY PACKS

One risk particular to herbal highs is that, because they are assumed not to be harmful, people tend to take more than their bodies can cope with. At a recent rave in Worcester in the Western Cape, says Cape Town writer and veteran raver Mario d'Offizi, 'a surprising number of people lined the medic tents, having a bad trip – probably from having taken too much'.

Du Toit says one of the more common legal highs locally is from *sceletium tortuosum*, also known as 'Bushman's ecstasy', 'African ecstasy', 'herbal ecstasy', *kanna* and *kougoed*. It's a herb indigenous to South Africa and has long been used as a mood-enhancer by the San.

'It can be smoked in powder form or taken in tablets,' says D'Offizi. It is available online and from various health shops around the country. For 30 capsules of 100mg each, you'll pay about R80.

The problem with using it as a party drug is that it needs to be taken in large quantities to create a 'high' – and that can, as one UK blogger records, make you 'anxious and jittery, unable to concentrate'. An overdose, according to the website [www.drugsafetysite.com](http://www.drugsafetysite.com), can result in 'delirium and loss of consciousness'.

## Girl, 24, collapses and dies 'after taking Meow party drug'

© Publicado el 24 de Marzo de 2010 por Felix Larrosa

Resumen

Ya lo habíamos reportado en varias ocasiones...

The family of a 24-year-old woman whose death police have linked to the party drug mephedrone today paid tribute to a 'really lovely girl'.

Lois Waters' body was found yesterday at an address in the village of Norton, North Yorkshire.

Detective Chief Inspector Nigel Costello, who is leading the inquiry, said family and friends have told him she had been taking the drug in the 48-hour period leading up to her death, possibly with other substances.

Today her tearful mother, Allison, said the death of her 'quiet' daughter was unexpected and that she was a 'really lovely girl'.

Mrs. Waters was visibly emotional as she spoke about her daughter at a family member's home in Norton today.

She said: 'Lois was a really lovely girl, she was really quiet. That's all I can really say about her at the moment.'



## THE FULL MINTY

*Salvia divinorum* is a drug derived from the mint plant and was originally used by Mexican shamans to achieve altered states of consciousness.

It is chewed or smoked – popularly with marijuana, says D'Offizi – and is said to be hallucinogenic for up to five minutes, but not always pleasantly so. A blogger on [www.drugs-forum.com](http://www.drugs-forum.com) who took too much describes his experience with salvia as 'a trip through hell'.

Andrea says she's always been 'too scared' to try it. 'I've heard it messes with your brain, like the flowers of the *malpit* plant, which a friend of mine took once – she ended up screaming at a dressing gown for hours and had to be hospitalised.'

Again, salvia is easily accessible in South Africa online – with five grams of leaves selling for only R50 or so.

## SHROOMAH!

Magic mushrooms or 'shrooms' are also grown here, either cultivated or wild. They are typically dried and sold in a 'bankie' (small plastic bag). They are taken raw or powdered, and are sometimes mixed into tea.

Psilocybin mushrooms contain psychoactive alkaloids, the effects of which can be powerful and are sometimes likened to those of LSD. On a 'bad' mushroom trip, you can experience paranoia, hallucinations, anxiety, nausea and diarrhoea that can last for three to six hours. 'I fell into a terrifying trance. I saw geometric shapes and patterns moving towards me and ▶

felt totally out of control,' says Carol\*, 30, a copywriter from Johannesburg.

### UPS AND DOWNS

Dozens of other concoctions, not all herbal-based, are sold as 'legal highs' in tubs of pills, among them so-called 'funk pills', which contain benzylpiperazine (BZP), a stimulant that has proved to be extremely euphoric for some, but very unpleasant for others, in some cases for as long as 12 hours. It's been banned in some countries but can still be ordered online. Common on the South African rave scene for some time was a pill called Midnite Flight, which contained the stimulant ephedrine along with a number of complex vitamins, and was 'extremely powerful', says Steve Blues, co-founder of the local clubbing website [www.mrspencer.com](http://www.mrspencer.com).

Similar pills, with names such as Red Heart, Ice Diamonds, Charge and Push, have come and gone, and Blues says he has seen some of their adverse effects at work. 'People end up as twitching, dysfunctional lumps,' he says.

But Merle Jacobs, founder of PlaySafe (formerly known as RaveSafe) and also a veteran of the rave scene, says bad reactions from these pills are usually due to people popping more than they should. 'You will always get people who abuse these things, who'll just put three in their mouth and swallow, but in my experience they are by far the minority,' she says.

### TRIP ADVISER

Du Toit cautions that just because something is 'natural' doesn't mean

it's good for you. 'Natural in source it may be, but so is poison ivy and strychnine. Look at what marijuana does, and it's also a natural substance,' she says.

Scientists from the Queensland Brain Institute in Australia recently found that young people who smoke dagga for six years or more are twice as likely to have psychotic episodes, hallucinations or delusions as people who have never used the drug, she says.

Like marijuana, other herbal drugs can be psychologically addictive, says Du Toit. She also points out that, because herbal concoctions don't have to be registered with the Medicines Control Board, you can never be sure of their effects.

Peddlers of these drugs are doing it to make money, she adds, so the drugs are often surreptitiously cut with other substances, just as synthetic drugs are. 'The point is, you never know exactly what you're taking when it comes to unregulated drugs, and if you're drinking or taking other drugs, which is commonly the case, you don't know how these substances will interact with each other. Everybody processes these things differently,' she says.

Also, some people have an unknown predisposition to psychosis or a heart condition that it takes just one drug-induced trip to trigger, she warns. 'Mephedrone and most of the other herbal highs are stimulants, which increase your heart rate. If you have a weak heart to begin with, it's very dangerous indeed. This may well have been the scenario in the UK mephedrone tragedies,' she says.

### RUSSIAN ROULETTE

Although South African rehab centres – which counsel about 10 000 patients at any one time – have not reported cases of patients seeking help for addiction to mephedrone or other herbal drugs, they are well aware of the threat these substances present, says Andreas Plüddemann of the Medical Research Council's Alcohol & Drug Abuse Research Unit.

Pam Goodman of Tharagay House addictions-treatment facility in Cape Town says, 'Just because we're not seeing such cases at centres doesn't mean these drugs aren't out there, being used in a game of Russian roulette with willing participants who don't appreciate the risks they're taking.' □

\* NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

### BAD-TRIP TIPS

If a friend is having a 'bad trip' on drugs, what can you do to help her?

- If she is feeling ill or anxious after taking a drug, legal or illegal, act immediately. Take her somewhere quiet and try to keep her calm.
- Try to keep her cool; stay with her.
- If she collapses, turn her on her side. Check that there is nothing in her mouth and that her airway is clear.
- If you suspect an overdose, call an ambulance immediately. Tell the paramedics exactly what she took.
- If she stops breathing or you think her heart has stopped, perform CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) if you know how.
- Do not let her drive, especially if the drug she has taken causes sensory changes (as magic mushrooms do).

## Herbal lows

SPIRITUAL OR DANGEROUS? WE SAY YOUR BEST BET IS GETTING HIGH ... ON LIFE!

#### MARIJUANA

New research shows this weed can double the likelihood of psychotic episodes.

#### MEPHEDRONE

This synthetic form of an ingredient in the East African plant khat has been banned in the UK after causing two deaths.

#### SALVIA DIVINORUM

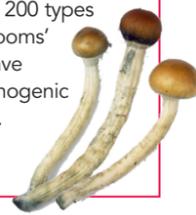
Derived from the mint plant, it was first used in spiritual rituals by Mexican shamans.

#### SCELETIUM TORTUOSUM

Overdosing on this mood-enhancer can cause delirium.

#### MUSHROOMS

Traditionally used by shamans, there are almost 200 types of 'shrooms' that have hallucinogenic effects.



[www.cosmopolitan.co.za](http://www.cosmopolitan.co.za)

The safest natural high is still endorphins. Release them with the workouts from our Fitness section.

PHOTOGRAPHY GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES, GREAT STOCK/CORBIS  
MAIN PICTURE POSED BY MODEL