

New trend in magic mushrooms reflects young Europeans appetite for intense experiences

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Many young Europeans are experimenting with hallucinogenic (magic) mushrooms, according to a new study released today by the EU drugs agency (EMCDDA) to mark International day against drug abuse and illicit trafficking. The phenomenon may be driven by a broader consumer trend for young people to actively seek out intense experiences and natural highs and by an increasing interest in organic products.

Smartshops* in the Netherlands and market stalls in Ireland and the UK played a key role in kick-starting a new magic mushroom trend in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The Internet was another contributing factor, offering an array of websites selling them directly online. Today there are scores of magic mushroom websites in the EU providing a multilingual marketing channel and e-commerce sales outlets offering doorstep delivery.

Hallucinogenic mushrooms: an emerging trend case study, is the first in a series of reports to be published under a new EMCDDA pilot project to help detect, track and understand emerging drug trends in Europe (European Perspectives On Drugs/E-POD)**.

The study analysed data on magic mushrooms gathered from July to October 2005 and drew on a variety of sources across Europe (Reitox network, scientific literature, youth magazines, websites, media reports, surveys). It focused specifically on fungi containing psilocybin and psilocin, two substances controlled under the 1971 UN Convention on Psychotropic Substances and found growing wild in many European countries.

Prevalence estimates on the use of magic mushrooms in the EU are considerably lower than those for cannabis, but are similar to those recorded for ecstasy. Surveys among school students (15-16 years) across Europe report lifetime use ranging from 0% to 8% for both substances, although more typically prevalence lies between 1% and 3%. One positive finding is that most use of magic mushrooms is experimental, with regular use relatively rare.

Among school students, lifetime prevalence of magic mushroom use equals that of ecstasy use in the Czech Republic, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and Poland and exceeds it in Belgium, Germany and France. The highest lifetime prevalence of magic mushroom use is recorded in the Czech Republic (between 5% and 8%) and is lowest in Cyprus, Finland and Romania (below 0.5%).

Surveys conducted in nightclubs show illegal drug use to be higher among clubbers than among the general or school populations. In a sample of individuals interviewed in French clubs, as many as 55% reported they had tried magic mushrooms. Use is more common among young people who have used other illegal drugs (particularly ecstasy) than among young people who have not.

Since 2001, six EU countries have tightened controls on hallucinogenic fungi to respond to recent increases in use: Denmark (2001), the Netherlands (2002), Germany, Estonia, UK (2005) and Ireland (2006). In some countries, this stricter legislation is helping to prevent diffusion of the trend. Reports in the UK, for example, suggest it has had an impact on the availability of magic mushrooms and overall volume of Internet sales.

However, these new controls may only be partially effective as retailers switch to the sale of legal hallucinogens or develop marketing strategies that fall outside existing legislation or exploit legislative difficulties. A particular concern is the marketing of mushrooms of the Agaric family (e.g. fly agaric) and the related Amanita species which can be highly toxic and cause fatal poisoning.

User accounts of unpredictable potency, bad taste and negative effects of magic mushrooms (e.g. nausea, panic attacks, shivering) may all contribute to their recreational or repeated use. Drug prevention programmes often provide information on hallucinogenic drugs alongside other drug information but, as there are few reports of prevention materials relating exclusively to magic mushroom use.

EMCDDA Director Wolfgang Gtz says: Drugs can go quickly in and out of fashion. The EMCDDA's E-POD project will gather practical intelligence on new substances and trends in order to inform law enforcers, policy-makers, politicians and educators. Just as trends in music and fashion cross borders, so do illicit drugs. By focusing on specific drug types, E-POD will act as the eyes and ears of the EU, serving as a pan-European radar on fashionable drugs and helping countries identify and respond quickly and effectively to new waves in drug use and their associated health risks.

Notes to editors

*A smartshop is a shop found in the Netherlands specialising in psychoactive herbal substances that are legal in addition to a range of vitamins, mineral supplements and other health products. Currently there are about 150 such shops.

**The project falls within the EU drugs action plan (2005/2008) which calls for the development of clear information on emerging trends and patterns of drug use and drug markets. For more on E-POD, see page 6 of today's report.

Today's study is available on the EMCDDA website, see Thematic papers under Publications at www.emcdda.europa.eu

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