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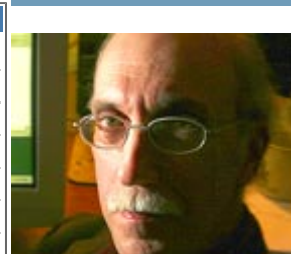
Mushrooms take a trip back to the lab

Banned hallucinogens may have medical benefits, but results are unpredictable.

By Denise Gellene, Times Staff Writer
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Resting on a hospital bed beneath a tie-dyed wall hanging, Pamela Sakuda felt a tingling sensation. Then bright colors started shimmering in her head.

Out of pain

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She had been depressed since being diagnosed with colon cancer two years earlier, but as the experimental drug took hold, she felt the sadness sweep away from her, leaving in its wake an overpowering sense of connection to loved ones, followed by an inner calm.



Cancer victim

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"It was like an epiphany," said Sakuda, 59, recalling the 2005 drug treatment.

Sakuda, a Long Beach software developer, was under the influence of the hallucinogen psilocybin, which she took during a UCLA study exploring the therapeutic effects of the active compound in "magic" mushrooms. Although illegal for general use, the drug has been approved for medical experiments such as this one.

Scientists suspect the hallucinogen, whose use dates back to ancient Mexico, may have properties that could improve treatments for some psychological conditions and forms of physical pain.

Long dismissed as medically useless, the banned mushrooms — a staple of the psychedelic 1960s — are taking a long, strange trip back to the lab.

The medical journal *Neurology* in June reported on more than 20 cases in which mushroom ingestion prevented or stopped cluster headaches, a rare neurological disorder, more reliably than prescription pharmaceuticals.

In July, researchers at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore reported that mushrooms could instill a sense of spirituality and connection, a finding that scientists said could lead to treatments for patients suffering from mental anguish or addiction.

The research has been driven in part by the success of mood-altering pharmaceuticals,

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such as the antidepressant Prozac, which work on the same brain chemicals and pathways.

Nothing scientists have learned so far indicates that recreational use of mushrooms is safe. The psychological effects remain unpredictable. Deaths have been linked to mushroom intoxication. A Ventura County teen was killed by a car two years ago as she wandered naked across the 101 Freeway after eating mushrooms.

Even under the tightly controlled conditions of a clinical trial, some patients have had terrifying experiences marked by anxiety and paranoia; two people in the Johns Hopkins study likened the experience to being in a war.

The drug "takes your thoughts through a prism and turns them around," Sakuda said.

Her drug trip left her with a sense of peace — a serenity she hadn't felt since her diagnosis.

"It was like rebooting a computer," she said.

Drugs' medical history

Forty years ago, the study of hallucinogens in therapy was a mainstream endeavor. The Swiss drug company Sandoz provided pharmaceutical-grade tablets of psilocybin and various researchers explored its use as a treatment for depression and other psychological problems.

Used for centuries during spiritual ceremonies by the Mazatec Indians in southern Mexico, mushrooms helped fuel the counterculture of the 1960s. Author Carlos Castaneda, while a graduate student at UCLA, wrote of his "magical time" with a Mexican shaman who introduced him to mushrooms and other hallucinogens.

In 1970, Congress made it illegal to possess hallucinogens, including psilocybin and LSD, by classifying them as Schedule I, meaning they had no legitimate medical use.

"All research was shut down," said UCLA psychiatrist Dr. Charles S. Grob.

In the late 1990s, regulators began approving experiments again, sparked by discoveries in neuroscience that illuminated the biochemical basis of mood and consciousness. The advances focused on the complex role of the brain chemical serotonin — a neurotransmitter that passes signals between cells.

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