

Emerging Drug Trends: Salvia Divinorum



Information Brief

April 2009

Salvia: How Dangerous is the Legal Mexican Herb? Many U.S. States Move toward Regulation

Overview

Salvia Divinorum (commonly known as Salvia), a herb of the mint family, is now the most commonly used hallucinogen in the U.S., behind Ecstasy. Used for centuries in divination rituals by the Mazatec tribes of Southern Mexico, it is ingested through chewing the leaves of the plant, drinking extracted juices, smoking dried leaves, or inhaling vapors. Salvia's active ingredient, Salvinorin A, is as potent as LSD and is the strongest known naturally occurring hallucinogen. Despite its intense hallucinogenic properties, neither Salvia nor Salvinorin A are currently regulated under the Federal Controlled Substances Act. However, the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) has identified Salvia as a drug of concern.

Salvia's expanding presence on the Internet—where the herb is freely bought and sold and users upload their “trips” for public viewing—is prompting many states to take the initiative and create their own legislation to control it and/or Salvinorin A. At least nine states have placed Salvia under Schedule I of State law, and four states have adopted other legislation concerning distribution and/or possession.

Hallucinogenic Effects

The quickest and most common method of Salvia ingestion is the smoking of dried leaves, similar to Marijuana, in joints, from a bong, or in pipes. Found chiefly in the leaves of Salvia, Salvinorin A primarily affects the kappa opiate receptor site of the brain, which is responsible for the regulation of perception. The effects of Salvia can usually be felt within 30 seconds, and rarely last more than 30 minutes.

Users experience hallucinations that include bright lights, shapes, patterns, colors, and the distortion of objects or the body. Other psychological effects include dysphoria, an intense disassociation from the outside world, and uncontrollable periods of laughter. Salvia use can also cause dizziness, slurred speech, chills, nausea, decreased heart rate, and a lack of coordination. Though the Mazatecs have been using Salvia for centuries, the long-term effects of the herb on the brain and the rest of the body remain unknown and have not been fully investigated.

Patterns of Use

According to SAMHSA's 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), male young adults ages 18-25 are the primary users of Salvia, with about 750,000 people ages 12 or older using Salvia in the past year. While only 1.8 million people have used Salvia in their lives, it surpasses both LSD and PCP in rates of past year usage.

Known as the “new Ecstasy,” Salvia, like Ecstasy, is often used by groups who share their sensory experiences with the hallucinogen. In the case of Salvia, however, the experiences are often shared online via Internet outlets such as www.youtube.com. Furthermore, unlike many drugs that are purchased “face to face,” either behind closed doors or on the street, Salvia is most commonly purchased online or in tobacco or head shops.

The use of Salvia has been associated with several deaths in the United States. Brett Chidester, a high school senior in Delaware, committed suicide in 2006, leaving behind a note that credited Salvia as helping him find the

Quick Facts

- Salvia is the strongest known naturally occurring hallucinogen.
- Currently legal in almost all states, the Drug Enforcement Agency has identified Salvia as a drug of concern and is investigating possible classification under Schedule I.
- Salvia primarily affects the part of the brain that is responsible for regulating perception.
- Effects of Salvia are very short-acting, rarely lasting more than 30 minutes.
- According to SAMHSA's 2006 NSDUH report, Salvia was used by approximately 750,000 individuals 12 or older in the past year— more than PCP and LSD.
- According to the same survey, about 1.8 million individuals 12 and older have used Salvia in their lifetime.
- Nine states have placed Salvia on State-level Schedule I restrictions.
- Four states have enacted laws restricting possession and distribution of Salvia.

The New Ecstasy?

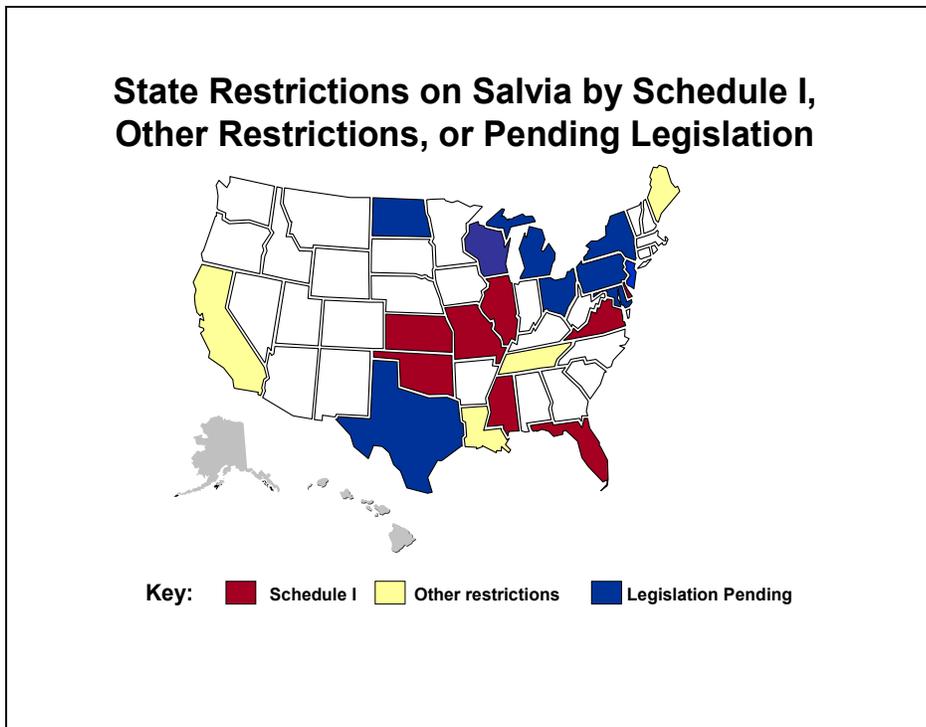
meaning of life. However, no traces of Salvia were found in his system at the time of his death. Similarly, Mario G. Argenziano, a 42 year-old restaurant manager in Yonkers, NY, accidentally shot himself in the face 10 minutes after smoking Salvia and died from the wounds. Horrified onlookers said their friend grabbed the gun from a nightstand, pointed it at himself, and acted confused. According to his wife, Argenziano was a gun collector who knew how to handle firearms.

Efforts at Regulation

Although Salvia is currently under investigation by the DEA for scheduling under the Controlled Substances Act, many States have enacted, or at least introduced, legislation restricting Salvia and its active component, Salvinorin A. Four states (CA, LA, ME, TN) have passed unique legislation beyond restricting its possession, use, or distribution in some form, nine have made it a Class B misdemeanor, and nine have restrictive legislation pending.

The State laws vary greatly in their restrictions:

- **Louisiana** was the first state to criminalize Salvia. While it is still legal to simply own the plant, it is a felony to possess Salvia in a form for consumption, such as dried leaves or extracts. There is a minimum sentence of two years in prison for distribution.
- **California** has prohibited selling or distributing Salvia or the extract Salvinorin A to minors.
- The restrictions in **Maine** are similar in that it is illegal to sell or distribute to minors. Possession by a minor is a civil violation.
- In **Tennessee**, the law only restricts growing or possessing Salvia for the purposes of human con-



sumption and allowing the plant for landscaping or other aesthetic purposes.

- **Delaware, Florida, Illinois, Kansas, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, Oklahoma, and Virginia** have placed Salvia under Schedule I restrictions. Many legislators use Delaware's "Brett's Law" as an model. Named for Chidester, this law makes possession, use, or consumption of Salvia a punishable Class B misdemeanor.
- In mid-January 2009, a bill was introduced to the **Maryland** State Legislature that would place Salvia and Salvinorin A on Schedule I, but the bill could also be reworked to regulate its sale in the state. All previous bills in Maryland concerning Salvia have died.

Many efforts to legislate the control of Salvia are often slow to be passed because Salvia is classified as "non-

addictive" and surveys cannot prove Salvia to be the direct cause of violent crimes.

Conclusion

Salvia, the strongest known naturally occurring hallucinogen, has recently become a drug of concern. Although trailing Ecstasy in rates of use, it is now more commonly used than both LSD and PCP among 18-25 year olds. The DEA is currently investigating Salvia for possible classification under Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act, but until a firm position is taken at the federal level, state lawmakers will likely continue to debate the legal status of the potent hallucinogen. As of January 2009, 35 states have at least introduced legislation which would control Salvia in some way; nine had placed it on Schedule I restrictions, and four had proposed other restrictions.

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