

Ayahuasca

What is ayahuasca?

Ayahuasca (pronounced 'eye-ah-WAH-ska') is a plant-based hallucinogenic tea. Hallucinogens (also known as 'psychedelics') can make a person see, hear, smell, feel or taste things that aren't really there or cause the person to experience things differently from how they are in reality.

The most common ingredients in ayahuasca are *Banisteriopsis caapi* (also known as caapi) and *Psychotria viridis*. Caapi contains beta-carboline alkaloids with monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitor action, mainly harmine, harmaline and tetrahydroharmine, whereas *Psychotria viridis* contains dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a serotonergic receptor agonist. DMT is not active orally because it is destroyed by the action of the MAO enzymes in the gastrointestinal tract, but in the presence of an MAO inhibitor, DMT can enter the circulatory system and penetrate the blood–brain barrier, thereby producing its effects.

Ayahuasca has been used for a number of centuries by traditional healers as a medicine and in religious ceremonies. Interest in the therapeutic benefits of ayahuasca has been increasing in western countries, in particular with regard to alcohol and drug dependence.

What does it look like?

Ayahuasca is a brown-reddish drink with a strong taste and smell.

Other names

Huasca, yagé, brew, daime, the tea, la purga

How is it used?

The tea is brewed for several hours by infusing the pounded stems of *Banisteriopsis caapi* in combination with *Psychotria viridis* or other plants. The tea is drunk and has an extremely bitter taste.

Effects of ayahuasca

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. It's important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

The effects begin in approximately 30 minutes to 1 hour, with maximum intensity from 1 to 2 hours. The effects last from 4 to 6 hours.

Ayahuasca affects everyone differently, based on:

- The person's size, weight and health
- Whether the person is used to taking it
- Whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- The amount taken
- The strength of the drug

The following effects may be experienced:

- Nausea
- Intense, repetitive vomiting (induced by the tea)
- Increased sweating
- Diarrhoea
- Fear and paranoia
- Feelings of euphoria and wellbeing
- Moderate increase in blood pressure and heart rate
- Increased body temperature
- Visual and auditory stimulation
- Anxiety

Overdose

A small number of deaths have occurred immediately following the use of ayahuasca, though ayahuasca being the direct cause of death is extremely rare.

If any of the following effects are experienced, an ambulance should be called straightaway by dialling triple zero (000). Ambulance officers don't need to involve the police.

An overdose can result in:

- Ongoing nausea
- Frightening visions
- Intense intoxication
- Increased risk-taking
- Panic
- Psychosis

Long-term effects

Research into the long-term use of ayahuasca is continuing. Early research indicates that long-term use of ayahuasca is not associated with loss of cognitive functioning.

Tolerance and dependence

Research has found that repeated use of ayahuasca does not lead to tolerance and that it has limited dependence potential.

Health and safety

It is difficult to predict the effects of ayahuasca (even if it has been taken before) as its strength varies from batch to batch.

People with mental health conditions or a family history of these conditions should avoid using ayahuasca. The drug can intensify the symptoms of anxiety and paranoia.

Use of ayahuasca is likely to be more dangerous when taken in combination with alcohol or other drugs, particularly stimulants such as crystal methamphetamine ('ice') or ecstasy. It can also be dangerous if taken with certain pharmaceutical drugs.

Further Information

The Druginfo website has information on:

- Health and safety
- Help and support
- References for this fact sheet

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Level 12, 607 Bourke Street, Melbourne
PO Box 818 North Melbourne Victoria Australia 3051

Email druginfo@adf.org.au Telephone **1300 85 85 84**

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