

Q. What is ayahuasca?

A. Ayahuasca is a hallucinogenic drink traditionally used in shamanic rituals by indigenous Amazonian tribes, prepared by boiling or soaking the bark and stems of *B. caapi* with additional alkaloid-containing plants. Ayahuasca is considered an “entheogen,” a term applied to a psychoactive substance used to occasion spiritual experiences by indigenous societies. The leaves of these alkaloid-containing plants contain DMT, a potent hallucinogenic, while the bark of *B. caapi* contains potent MAO-A inhibitors necessary for activation of DMT (McKenna, 2004). DMT shares the same primary brain mechanism of action as other classic hallucinogens such as LSD, psilocybin (in “magic mushrooms”), and mescaline (in peyote), and therefore produces effects similar to these other substances.

Q. What are the potential mechanisms of action underlying ayahuasca?

A. With respect to the treatment of PTSD, proponents claim that ayahuasca causes users to revisit and process issues associated with personal traumas. It has also been hypothesized that ayahuasca may produce therapeutic effects by changes in serotonin function in the brain, or other persisting biological changes (e.g., Callaway et al., 1994). Numerous additional claims have been made regarding the effects of ritualistic use of ayahuasca including divination and spiritual encounters.

Q. Is ayahuasca recommended in the Military Health System (MHS)?

A. **No.** Ayahuasca is not recommended in large part due to the lack of any randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of its effects on PTSD. Ayahuasca is not included in the 2010 *VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline for the Management of Post-traumatic Stress*, and thus has not met the burden of evidence required by the most recent VA/DoD publication.

The MHS relies on the VA/DoD clinical practice guidelines (CPGs) to inform best clinical practices. The CPGs are developed under the purview of clinical experts and are derived through a transparent and systematic approach that includes, but is not limited to, systematic reviews of the literature on a given topic and development of recommendations using a graded system that takes into account the overall quality of the evidence and the magnitude of the net benefit of the recommendation. A further description of this process and CPGs on specific topics can be found on the VA clinical practice guidelines website.

Q. Do other authoritative reviews recommend ayahuasca for PTSD?

A. **No.** Other authoritative reviews have not substantiated ayahuasca for PTSD.

Several other recognized organizations conduct systematic reviews and evidence syntheses on psychological health topics using similar grading systems as the VA/DoD CPGs. These include the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) Systematic Review Repository and the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews.

- AHRQ: No reviews were found on ayahuasca as a treatment for PTSD.
- Cochrane: No reviews were found on ayahuasca as a treatment for PTSD.

Q. Is there any recent research on ayahuasca as a treatment for PTSD?

A. As of a December 2016 systematic search of Cochrane Central, MEDLINE and EMBASE, no RCTs of the therapeutic use of ayahuasca for PTSD had been published. There have been a small number of observational and uncontrolled ayahuasca studies. Uncontrolled studies lack the methodological rigor for treatment conclusions to be drawn. Moreover, much of the existing observational and uncontrolled research has been conducted in healthy populations and there is little controlled clinical data on the safety of ayahuasca for human use, particularly among patients with PTSD.

The scarcity of ayahuasca research is likely in large part due to its legal status. Ayahuasca and its component plants are not illegal under international or U.S. law and may be legally used in religious ceremonies. However, DMT is a controlled substance and ayahuasca beverages containing DMT may therefore be considered illegal in the United States.

Q. What conclusions can be drawn about ayahuasca as a treatment for PTSD in the MHS?

A. There is currently no rigorous evidence that ayahuasca is effective in the treatment of PTSD, and therefore ayahuasca is not recommended by current guidelines or authoritative reviews. The burden of evidence needed to substantiate a novel treatment such as ayahuasca is considerable, and would likely necessitate considerable evidence of safety in the PTSD population as well as rigorous RCTs demonstrating efficacy. Several programs and retreats purporting to use ayahuasca to treat PTSD have emerged in recent years. Absent evidence for efficacy, and considering possible safety and legal concerns, these programs and retreats cannot be recommended for the treatment of PTSD or as an adjunctive treatment.

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References

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