

Is ecstasy a gain or drain to brain?

by Tom Philp
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THE MYSTERY surrounding "ecstasy" — the controversial designer drug whose users claim incredible personal insight and whose detractors fear horrible brain damage — may be solved by pioneering research under way in Santa Clara County.

The nation's first ecstasy research on monkeys and people is being conducted in laboratories at the Institute for Medical Research in San Jose and at Stanford University. In hopes of determining exactly what the sub-

stance does or doesn't do to the brain.

The initial research on monkeys shows heavy losses of a type of brain signal transmitter and signs of potential brain damage. But the work on the humans — 23 heavy users who have been flown to San Jose from throughout the country for examination — remains confidential until a medical journal reviews the research.

Ecstasy, a hybrid drug between a hallucinogen and an amphetamine, is also known as MDMA or Adam.

The drug, first made by a German company in 1914 as a possible appetite suppressant, is popu-

lar on college campuses and among young professionals despite a federal ban on the substance. At Stanford, for example, a recent survey indicated that perhaps 30 percent of the undergraduates had tried the drug.

Many psychiatrists and therapists swear by ecstasy's ability to induce in their patients a peaceful discovery of personal insights, accomplishments that therapy without drugs sometimes can't achieve. They are convinced that a small number of mild doses is safe.

Some users have reported physical side effects: tense jaws, clenched teeth, accelerated heartbeat and fatigue.

But sorting out and explaining these effects with solid science has been difficult, researchers and psychiatrists say.

The giant pharmacy companies, they say, don't want to touch ecstasy because the profit potential died when its patent did in the 1920s. No company has conducted any research on the substance in recent years, leaving that to a handful of university scientists.

But the biggest roadblock is the tight federal restrictions on the substance.

Ever since the federal Drug Enforcement Administration

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