

# Here's What's Being Said, Pro and Con, About MDMA

**L**ast month, the federal government banned a controversial drug, MDMA, also known in some circles as "Ecstasy." A scientific debate is now raging over whether the ban should be upheld. Here are excerpts, pro and con:

"I specialize in doing psychotherapy with people who have life-threatening illnesses such as cancer. I have given MDMA to 11 cancer patients and gotten excellent results.

"For example, Mrs. W. is a 37-year-old white married female with colon cancer which has metastasized to her liver. Her prognosis is poor. She always found it difficult to express her feelings and tends to hide her feelings behind a frozen smile.

"I did one MDMA session with Mrs. W. in which... she opened up emotionally and was able to discuss her feelings about dying in a deeply felt, meaningful way. Even more significant was the discussion that took place with her husband, mother and 17-year-old daughter following the therapy session itself. The family spent the entire evening talking about things that the patient had always wanted to say, but never quite could. Many unresolved feelings and family issues were dealt with openly and honestly in one evening. Mrs. W. says that was one of the most important days of her life, and she continues to make progress in her ability to communicate her feelings without fear." - *Richard Ingrassi, M.D., in written testimony presented to a federal administrative judge who must decide whether MDMA has an accepted medical use or should remain in the same legal category as heroin.*

"In the course of my duties as a Special Agent (of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, Dallas division), I had occasion to interview a defendant in a case involving the distribution of approximately 10 kilograms of cocaine. This source told me about a drug called 'Ecstasy,' which he had heard about, that was being sold on the street as a legal drug. The source indicated he had met (an alleged distributor) at an area nightclub where he had introduced the drug 'Ecstasy' to him by providing two red and green capsules. The source was informed by (the distributor) that the drug was fairly new and was similar to cocaine with an effect lasting six to eight hours. One such distributor told the source that on weekends he can clear \$5,000 by selling 'Ecstasy' mainly to strippers in adults-only entertainment clubs." - *DEA agent Robert C. Chester in written testimony at the MDMA hearings in Kansas City.*

MDMA "seems to have a remarkable capacity to help people get in touch with feelings, to become more open and trusting and less defensive, to facilitate the recall of early memories and invite self-exploration and insight. It is reported to have been used hundreds of times in psychotherapy with few serious complications. Although MDMA is chemically related to MDA, it is a milder and shorter-acting drug with less consciousness change and fewer secondary neurological symptoms. I think that its potential for abuse is probably low, if

one defines abuse as involving harm to the individual and/or society... Prematurely discouraging more systematic research by putting MDMA in Schedule I of the Controlled Substance Act would be a mistake." - *Lester Grinspoon, M.D., associate professor of psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, in written testimony at the MDMA hearings.*

"Evangelical pushers still talk about turning on the Pentagon, while enchanted psychiatrists lobby against bans, proof that the dream of nepenthe (a mythical potion used by Helen of Troy to banish sorrow and pain) is still alive. The dream has been disturbed by the night terror of MDMA's toxicity reminding us that we are like children charmed by Circe, the magical pharmacologist who lulled travelers with promises of ecstasy." - *Ronald K. Siegel of UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute, writing in OMNI magazine.*

"It is well known that nitrous oxide and diethyl ether, as prototypes of the general anesthetics, were first used in a recreational way. Had these been subject to (government bans), the era of painless surgery that these two particular substances ushered in might well have been needlessly delayed. I want to clearly point out that I do believe MDMA should be scheduled, so as to allow prosecution of operators of clandestine laboratories, and to restrict access to MDMA by the general public. However, I believe that MDMA should be placed in a schedule less restrictive than Schedule I." - *David E. Nichols, professor of medicinal chemistry, Purdue University, in testimony at the MDMA hearings.*

"My review of the scientific literature failed to identify any references to studies concerning the therapeutic utility of MDA... (but) MDA has been encountered with increasing frequency in the illicit drug traffic since 1970. DEA laboratories analyzed over 60,000 dosage units of MDMA in 34 exhibits from 12 states between 1972 and 1983... (and) MDMA can be synthesized from readily available substances by individuals with minimal chemical education or training." - *Frank Sapienza, chemist, drug control section, U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, in written testimony at the MDMA hearings.*

"We have made a curiously self-disparaging decision when we judge that no one in a modern industrial society is qualified to do what is done by the leader of the peyote ceremony in the Native American Church or a Mazatec Indian healer who uses mind-altering mushrooms." - *Lester Grinspoon, M.D., associate professor of psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, in written testimony at the MDMA hearings.*

"There is no known legitimate use of MDMA in humans." - *U.S. Food and Drug Administration.*

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