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USA
TODAY

Life

THURSDAY, MAY 30, 1985

Is Ecstasy safe,

or in the same league as LSD?

By Dan Sperling
USA TODAY

"Ecstasy." Users say it's a safe, legal high. Some therapists say it's a valuable tool in treating psychological disorders. The government says it's just as bad as LSD.

The value of Ecstasy — officially, MDMA — will be argued next month when the federal Drug Enforcement

Administration begins hearings on whether to re-classify the drug, which is now as legal as table salt. It has been available on the street for a number of years.

The administration wants to put it on its Schedule I, a category of illicit drugs with no known medical use. This would make further research difficult, if not impossible, say therapists.

In Los Angeles June 10-11, MDMA proponents will challenge the administration, asking to put it in a less stringent category that would forbid street use but permit research.

Some therapists have been quietly using the drug with patients for a number of years.

"I've found it to be very safe and mild in terms of its effects and, when used as an

adjunct to psychotherapy, to be very valuable," says Wattertown, Mass., psychiatrist Rick Ingrassi, who has used MDMA with more than 200 patients in the past five years.

MDMA "produces a decrease in fear and anxiety, which allows a person to look inside himself, at his feelings, to develop a profound sense of well-being and self-acceptance."

"It's not been proven safe for use in humans," counters the administration's Frank Sapienza, who notes that a new study shows that a chemically similar drug, MDA, causes brain damage in animals.

Sapienza and others are concerned not only about possible toxic effects, but also report reactions such as anxiety and paranoia.