

# **Magic Mushrooms In The UK**

Some Useful Information In A Time Of Uncertainty

## **A Brief History of Magic Mushrooms**

The use of magic mushrooms is believed to date back thousands of years. 8000 year-old rock paintings in Tassili, Algeria for instance depict dancing shamans with what appear to be magic mushrooms sprouting from their bodies. Meso-American civilisations like the Maya and the Aztecs are also known to have utilised magic mushrooms. From studying the artwork and customs of these historical cultures, it is evident that the mushroom was accorded a sacred status.

Despite suppression by invading Spanish Conquistadors in the 16th century, magic mushroom use continued in secret in and around Mexico until being rediscovered by ethnomycologist Gordon Wasson some 50 years ago. Under the guidance of a native Mexican shaman named Maria Sabina, Wasson took part in a religious ceremony in which magic mushrooms were consumed. Wasson went on to introduce the West to the visionary realms potentiated by the mushroom in his various writings. Since that time, we have learned that hundreds of magic mushroom species grow throughout the world. Millions of people are now familiar with their various psychological effects.

## **The Current Status of Magic Mushrooms in Europe**

On 5th November 2002, the highest court in the Netherlands decided that fresh magic mushrooms were to be legalised as a food-product. This new categorising of the mushroom as a "vegetable" was enforced on 1st January 2003 and, due to EU trade laws, is valid in the whole of the EU.

## **The European Union**

As the EU is a customs union, every legally produced, marketed and used food product of one member country is automatically legal, tradable and consumable in all other EU member countries. This is also valid for EFTA (Switzerland, Norway, Liechtenstein and Iceland). No EU country can reject a legal food product of another EU country unless it can prove that there is a significant health and safety threat to its consumers. Thus, it is clear that British EU citizens have the right to consume, for instance, what Austrian or Portuguese citizens have the right to consume. Many healthy persons would even argue that magic mushrooms have the potential to enhance one's well-being and that the British government has no right to forbid them so long as there is no evidence for significant danger. This is especially the case when other products like alcohol and tobacco kill in excess of 100,000 British citizens each and every year and yet those products are fully endorsed by the government.

As far as official research goes, a report by a Dutch Risk Assessment Team found that magic mushroom use posed no significant danger either to health or to society (commercial magic mushrooms have been available in the Netherlands since the mid-1990's). Furthermore, a very recent extensive scientific study of the psychological and physiological effects of psilocybin (the mushroom's active ingredient) concluded that psilocybin was relatively safe when given to healthy volunteers. Even in the USA - where draconian drug laws prevail - a number of scientific studies are underway to explore the various therapeutic properties of psilocybin.

It is also important to bear in mind that the current trade in cultivated magic mushrooms erases one of the principal health risks previously associated with magic mushroom use - namely the collection of them from the wild. Collecting wild magic mushrooms involves the risk that the wrong species are picked. Indeed, the British government's own web site [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com) states that: "The biggest danger with taking any magic mushrooms is making sure you're taking the right thing." As some mushrooms are deadly poisonous, it is clear that to pick magic mushrooms from the wild requires the ability to accurately differentiate between various species. This problem is obviated with commercially available mushrooms.

### **Legal Status In The UK**

British law appears to be utterly confused and confounded by the mushroom. At the time of writing (early January 2005), the mushroom is not listed as a controlled substance under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. Indeed, the mushroom has for the last 30 years or so been deemed legal as long as it is not processed. Over the last year and a half in which perhaps millions of magic mushrooms have been sold in the UK, there have been no high profile negative incidents - apart from the outcries of certain politicians and certain newspapers. Furthermore, a Home Office Report from 2000 stated that an estimated 1.5 million adults in England and Wales had taken magic mushrooms (these mushrooms would most likely have been picked from the wild or been cultivated in imported grow kits). Moreover, the Report stated that: "...magic mushroom use is assumed not to be problematic." Indeed, there were no reports of mushroom related hospitalisations in the section on hospital admissions. Thus, contrary to widespread media opinion, there is not a 'loophole in the law' that is allowing the mushroom to be traded. The loophole is actually in the political thinking process whereby the mushroom is assumed to be a major threat to public health when there is, in fact, no hard evidence to support such a view.

Despite these facts, the government is currently attempting to ban the mushroom outright through a proposal on Page 21, Paragraph 21 of the new Drugs Bill. The aim is to get the mushroom listed as a Class A drug, an unprecedented move which implies a problem of such magnitude that only drastic action can prevent societal catastrophe. If the clause in question were to become law, possession of the mushroom could entail 7 years in prison.

The proposed ruling has clearly been formulated in spite of the mushroom's benign profile, in spite of EU trade laws and even in spite of the substantial VAT revenue and gainful employment that the trade in magic mushrooms is generating. As to placing a long revered mushroom in the same category as heroin and crack cocaine, the absurdity of this speaks for itself. Banning the mushroom would force otherwise law-abiding people to either hunt for the mushroom in the wild (which carries dangers), buy them from an inevitable black market run by tax-evading organised criminals, or to purchase mushroom spores (which do not contain psilocybin) along with growth media in which to germinate the spores. It also means that vast tracts of pristine British countryside where magic mushrooms proliferate would constitute a priority health hazard and would ideally need to be sealed off by police. Indeed, most UK farmers and landowners would be technically guilty of possessing vast amounts of a Class A drug (the same as if they inadvertently had thousands of opium poppies growing on their land). One therefore hopes that the government amend the Drugs Bill in accordance with the non-addictive, non-toxic and non-problematic nature of the mushroom. Doing this will also prevent an EU trade backlash. It is clear that the British government needs to integrate its policies in a sensible fashion and not succumb to unwarranted hysteria. One must hope that the new Drugs Bill be carefully scrutinised by parliament and be adjusted in light of the established facts about the mushroom's low risk status.

## Those Who Should Avoid The Mushroom

As with all mood altering substances (and this includes alcohol, tobacco and prescription drugs), there are potential dangers. Some basic common sense can go a long way in avoiding problems. Thus, it is NOT recommended that magic mushrooms be consumed if:

- you have any kind of mental health problem, mild or otherwise
- you are in an unknown place
- you are in a noisy and chaotic environment
- you feel insecure or ill or are depressed
- you feel pressurised or forced
- you suffer from high blood pressure
- you are pregnant or breast-feeding <sup>\*)</sup>
- you are taking prescription drugs
- you have work to do the next few hours
- you want to drive a car or operate machinery <sup>\*\*)</sup>
- you want to drink alcohol or consume other drugs

In line with the current system of self-regulation and until the advent of proper licensing, magic mushrooms should only be sold to adults over the age of 18.

<sup>\*)</sup> No damaging effects of magic mushrooms upon unborn children is known. However, pregnant or breast feeding women bear the responsibility of their offspring and thus should only do what they know to be safe.

<sup>\*\*)</sup> For at least 14 hours after ingestion of magic mushrooms, you should not drive your car. As with almost all psychoactive agents, magic mushrooms can hinder your ability to react quickly and efficiently.

## Major Effects

The magic mushroom was originally classified as being a 'psychedelic' in the 1960's. Psychedelic means 'mind manifesting' and the mushroom does seem to amplify subconscious and unconscious aspects of the mind. Nowadays the mushroom is referred to as being 'entheogenic' which indicates that it can generate a deeply spiritual experience. Colours can appear much richer. Time may appear to slow down - sometimes dramatically so. Profound thoughts may come to mind. Things in the environment may appear to be interconnected and part of some large pattern, as if everything were moving in a coherent fluidic way. Even the most common object may appear fascinating (it is possible that these kinds of psychological effects occur because the usual associations we have about the world no longer prevail and we are thus seeing the world as if for the first time). Hallucinations - the seeing of an object which does not actually exist - are quite rare. It is more the case that the world is perceived in a novel way. With eyes closed however, one may experience rapidly unfolding visual scenes.

As to the physiological effects of magic mushrooms, these can very occasionally include excessive yawning, tears in the eyes, a runny nose, pins and needles, a need to pee, sweating, and sensations of hot and cold.

The mushroom is not addictive.

## Unpleasant Experiences

Depending on the individual's expectations and the environment in which the mushroom is taken, unpleasant experiences can sometimes happen. In these very rare cases, the state of being 'bemushroomed'<sup>\*)</sup> may be experienced as being threatening. These so-called 'bad trips' may be a consequence of ego-dissolution. Magic mushrooms have the ability to dissolve away artificial images of the self along with rigid belief systems. The mushroom can break down the ego and reveal a person's essence, that part of a person which is not culturally determined. A small minority of users may feel threatened by this process. In rare cases, the mushroom might also cause a person to relive memories of being under threat or of feeling fear. Such experiences may indicate to the user that he or she should search for therapeutic help in order to come to terms with the hidden trauma.

Sometimes, the bemushroomed person does not feel bad at all. It may just look that way for others in their company who have not been informed about the mushroom's psychological effects.

<sup>\*)</sup> 'bemushroomed' is a word coined by Gordon Wasson to describe the effects of the psilocybin mushroom. Given that language must evolve to accommodate new experiences and new information, it is hoped that relatively new words like 'bemushroomed' and 'entheogenic' continue to be popularised.

## Ways To Help Prevent Negative Experiences

Bringing an anxious person into hospital against his or her will can sometimes lead to a worsening of the situation. Thus, here are some points to adhere to:

- consume magic mushrooms only in a safe, quiet and comfortable place where you can avoid interference
- if you consume magic mushrooms at home, tell all of your co-inhabitants beforehand
- if you want, have a close and trusted non-bemushroomed friend stay with you and act as an 'anchor' so as to help dissipate any feelings of panic should they arise
- be aware that the first phase of the mushroom's effect may be a mild feeling of uneasiness. This phase is short-lived as one passes into a more positive and enhanced mode of perception
- be sure that no-one will need your presence within 6-8 hours after ingestion and that no strangers will bother you
- keep this information leaflet with you so that uninformed people can read it and thereby understand the situation
- in the event that you feel unpleasant feelings arising, do not try to block out the experience but try to accept the submerged contents of your own mind. Trying to forcibly resist the experience may only make matters worse
- if traumatic memories are relived, attempt to reach a deeper understanding of them so as to resolve the problems - many experienced users regard the mushroom as a kind of teacher

## A Final Word

It should be reiterated that negative experiences with magic mushrooms are very rare. Most consumers have an illuminating experience. Those whose experiences are negative are unlikely to take the mushroom again. This is in stark contrast to alcohol use where people are prepared to drink themselves into a sick and sorry state again and again. To be sure, there can be no comparisons whatsoever between mushroom use and alcohol use. Whereas alcohol has the potential to dissolve awareness and self-knowledge, the mushroom has the potential to increase awareness and self-knowledge. This explains the revered status of the mushroom throughout human history as well as the current therapeutic psilocybin research being conducted right now in the USA.

In summary, it is clear from the literature and from research over the last 50 years that the mushroom has spiritual value and the potential to afford people a life-affirming experience. To criminalise such a gracious natural resource is to criminalise both the human spirit and Nature herself. Let us trust that sense prevails in the coming months and years.

***Proceed with caution and have a safe and enlightening journey!***



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## Key Internet Sources

Magic Mushroom Consumer Group:

<http://www.magicmushroomconsumers.org/sd.htm>

Dutch Risk Assessment Study:

[www.erowid.org/plants/mushrooms/mushrooms\\_health1.pdf](http://www.erowid.org/plants/mushrooms/mushrooms_health1.pdf)

2004 scientific study that found psilocybin to be safe:

[www.maps.org/research/hasler\\_2004\\_1.pdf](http://www.maps.org/research/hasler_2004_1.pdf)

EU trade regulations:

[europa.eu.int/comm/internal\\_market/goods/index\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu.int/comm/internal_market/goods/index_en.htm)

Home Office Report on the non-problematic nature of magic mushrooms:

[www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hors249.pdf](http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hors249.pdf)

A set of rational licensing proposals for the trade in magic mushrooms:

[www.tdpf.org.uk](http://www.tdpf.org.uk)

Information on current psilocybin therapy studies:

[www.maps.org](http://www.maps.org) and [www.heffter.org](http://www.heffter.org)

If you want the current Drugs Bill to be amended so as to take into account the relatively benign profile of the mushroom, please use this link:

[www.petitiononline.com/DBPF/petition.html](http://www.petitiononline.com/DBPF/petition.html)

Or write to your local MP. Those with literary skills may wish to write a polite but firm letter to the Home Office at:

Home Office, Direct Communications Unit,  
7th Floor, 50 Queen Anne's Gate  
London SW1H 9AT

For guidelines on how to write an effective letter to the Home Office, visit:

[www.feedback.homeoffice.gov.uk/publicenquiries\\_tips.html](http://www.feedback.homeoffice.gov.uk/publicenquiries_tips.html)

Alternatively, you can email the Home Office at:

[www.feedback.homeoffice.gov.uk/contact\\_enquiries.asp](http://www.feedback.homeoffice.gov.uk/contact_enquiries.asp)

If you use the Home Office's email facility, you may wish to state that you disagree with the government's proposals to criminalise the mushroom and point out that the mushroom is not harmful. Please ensure that your emails are polite.

The information in this leaflet is for informational and educational purposes only and is considered to be accurate as of early January 2005. Bear in mind that British law is subject to unpredictable change. EU trade laws remain the same.

Text written with wholly good intentions by Joseph Chip and David Schlesinger.

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