

Scientist says psychedelic brew consumed by Amazonian shamans could fight cancer

Eric W. Dolan | [PSYPOST](#)

A powerful psychedelic brew consumed by shamans deep in the Amazon could help in the fight against cancer and should be researched, according to a Brazilian scientist.

Ayahuasca – meaning the “vine of the souls” – is traditionally prepared using the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and *Psychotria viridis* leaves, though other combinations of plants are sometimes used. *Psychotria viridis* contains *N,N*-dimethyltryptamine (DMT) in the leaves, while *Banisteriopsis caapi* contains beta-carbolines such as harmine and harmaline.

For centuries, the psychedelic brew has been used in shamanistic healing rituals. A *Natural Geographic* reporter who participated in an ayahuasca ritual [described the experience](#) as “terrifying–but enlightening.”

Eduardo E. Schenberg of the Federal University of Sao Paulo thinks some of the healing powers attributed to ayahuasca deserve scientific attention, particularly when it comes to cancer.

“There is enough available evidence that ayahuasca’s active principles, especially DMT and harmine, have positive effects in some cell cultures used to study cancer, and in biochemical processes important in cancer treatment, both in vitro and in vivo,” he wrote in an article published in [SAGE Open Medicine](#). “Therefore, the few available reports of people benefiting from ayahuasca in their cancer treatment experiences should be taken seriously, and the hypothesis presented here, fully testable by rigorous scientific

experimentation, helps to understand the available cases and pave the way for new experiments.”

Rumors of ayahuasca helping people with cancer are common, according to Schenberg, and there are at least nine case reports of cancer patients using ayahuasca during their treatment. Of these nine reports, three showed improvements after consuming the psychedelic brew.

Rumors and less than a dozen case reports are hardly substantial evidence. But the physiological effects of the drug suggests there might be some truth behind them, Schenberg said.

DMT produces a powerful psychedelic experience by binding to serotonin receptors in the brain. More importantly, for Schenberg, the drug also binds to the sigma 1 receptor, which is found throughout the body and is involved in many cellular functions. The sigma 1 receptor appears to be implicated in the death signalling of cancer cells.

In addition, harmine has been shown to induce the death of some cancer cells and inhibit the proliferation of human carcinoma cells.

Other physiological factors suggest the combination of DMT and harmine could have medically-important antitumor effects, though more research is need.

“In summary, it is hypothesized that the combined actions of β -carboline and DMT present in ayahuasca may diminish tumor blood supply, activate apoptotic pathways, diminish cell proliferation, and change the energetic metabolic imbalance of cancer cells, which is known as the Warburg effect,” Schenberg wrote. “Therefore, ayahuasca may act on cancer hallmarks such as angiogenesis, apoptosis, and cell metabolism.”

DMT is currently prohibited as a Schedule I drug by the U.S. Controlled Substances Act and the international Convention on

Psychotropic Substances. The drug is relatively unknown compared to other illicit substances like cannabis, but researchers have found that [DMT appears to be increasing in popularity](#).

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