

FACT SHEET THIRTY ONE

LSD

What is LSD?

Lysergic Acid Diethylamide (LSD) is a derivative of ergot, a fungus that grows on rye and other grains. LSD was discovered in 1938 and was used experimentally in the early 1950's to treat individuals with alcoholism, mental disorders, epilepsy and terminal cancers. The experiments proved unsuccessful but claims about LSD's psychedelic effects promoted a street level demand, in response to the growing use of LSD, rules banning its manufacture and use were implemented world-wide.

However, illegal production of black market distribution increased LSD use among people aged under 35 years to its highest point in the late 1970's. This was followed by a decline in popularity and a levelling off of hallucinogenic abuse by the mid 1980's, during the 1990's there was a resurgence of LSD abuse in the UK.

LSD is one of the most potent of all drugs because it is active at extremely small amounts, in the 60's/70's one dose usually consisted of between 50-300 microgram's (one microgram = one millionth of a gram). Currently a dose rarely consists of more than 100 micrograms.

LSD is odourless, tasteless and colourless, it is sold on the street as tablets or capsules, but more commonly the liquid form of LSD is placed on or in another substance and allowed to dry. Such substances include sugar cubes, postage stamps, 'microdots' (tiny balls of compacted powder) 'window pane' (small squares of gelatine or cellophane) and 'blotters' (small squares of absorbent paper with a pattern on them). When added to the gelatine sheets or blot of paper, the LSD is divided into small squares with each square representing one dose, the LSD is licked off or swallowed.

Effects of LSD

LSD is quickly absorbed from the stomach and intestines and its effects are felt in 30-40 minutes. Physical effects of LSD include dilated pupils, high body temperature, increased heart and rate and blood pressure, sweating, loss of appetite and a dry mouth.

Psychedelic effects occur within an hour of ingesting LSD causing a distortion in sensory perception. The colour and texture of objects become more vivid and perception is heightened, LSD effects all the body's senses especially vision.

Because of the distortion of sensory perception caused by LSD, driving is particularly dangerous. LSD causes the user to distrust the senses and can result in serious injury or even death.

Other effects include:

Hallucinations - the user believes an imaginary vision is real

Pseudo-hallucinations - unreal images that LSD users know are unreal

Synesthesia - the occurrence of one type of stimulation that triggers the sensation of another stimulation, such as hearing a sound causing the visualisation of a colour.

The sensory input can become so distorted in the LSD user that they may 'hear' colours and 'see' music. Other psychic effects experienced by LSD users include a loss of body image, a loss of sense of reality, a distorted sense of time and a shortened attention span. Many users develop an extreme preoccupation with philosophical ideas and may feel that they can 'solve all the problems of the world'.

LSD users can express emotional changes whilst taking the drug, they may also display inappropriate emotional responses such as laughing at something sad and crying during happy occasions. They can exhibit dramatic mood swings from extreme happiness to deep depression which are triggered by minor events such as the sun going down.

Tolerance, the need for increased amounts of the drug to produce the same effect, develops quickly with the continued use of LSD and also disappears quickly when someone stops using. Cross-tolerance, developed tolerance to one drug through the use of another drug within its pharmacological class, occurs with the use of other hallucinogens such as magic mushrooms.

Flashbacks, or re-experiencing the effects of LSD, can occur without warning for up to a year or more after use, although they are more common among frequent users. Flashbacks can occur at any time or place and maybe initiated by stress or the use of other drugs, it is thought that they represent behaviour learned under the influence of LSD or that they may be the result of unresolved emotional - psychological conflicts which were exposed during a "trip".

What is a bad trip?

Acute panic reactions, referred to as bad trips, can occur with the use of LSD. During these reactions the user feels in extreme danger and these frightening sensations may last for a few minutes or for several hours. The user experiences confusion, great anxiety, pain, suspiciousness, feelings of helplessness and loss of control. LSD and other hallucinogens sometimes unmask mental or emotional problems previously unknown to the user. If the panic reactions become intense, a drug induced psychosis may occur, this psychosis maybe brief or it may last for many years. It is impossible to

predict who will have a bad reaction to LSD and a user may have a severe panic time on their first trip or on their one hundredth and first trip.

A 'bad trip' is confusing and frightening and someone experiencing a panic reaction should not be left alone. You must remain calm, the user is sensitive to the moods of those who are near and may become fearful if the panic of others is apparent. Try to create a calm atmosphere by switching off bright lights and keeping the room quiet, reassure the user that the experience is a result of the drug they are taking and that the feelings will eventually pass. Talk about non-threatening things such as a pleasant memory, distract them with visual images or calming music, anything that will get their mind out of the panic state. Panic reactions can usually be handled by a calm and rational person but if the user becomes uncontrollable, then you must seek medical and professional help.

Signs and Symptoms of LSD Use

The following signs and symptoms are common amongst LSD users:

- Extremely dilated pupils
- Warm skin, excessive perspiration and body odour
- Distorted sense of sight, hearing and touch
- Distorted sense of time, self and place
- Mood and behaviour changes, the extent will depend on the emotional state of the user and the external environmental conditions.