

Study finds no ill effects of peyote use among Navajos: Religious ritual found to be safe

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Native Americans who use peyote as part of a religious ritual show no long-term negative health effects and actually fare better than recovering alcoholics, according to Harvard researchers.

A five-year study at Harvard-affiliated McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, also found that Navajo Indians who used peyote scored better on mental health tests than Navajos who did not use the hallucinogenic cactus.

“We found no evidence of psychological or cognitive deficits among Native Americans using peyote regularly in a religious setting,” the researchers said in the November 4 issue of the journal *Biological Psychiatry*.

A 1994 law allows some 300,000 members of the Native American Church to use peyote in religious ceremonies, and 1997 guidelines allow its use among an estimated 10,000 Native American members of the armed forces.

The use of peyote was scrutinized by the U.S. Supreme Court November 1 as part of a case that involved the importation of a hallucinogenic tea used by members of a small New Mexico religious sect. Lawyers for the sect argued that laws that protect the use of peyote should also protect the use of hoasca tea.

Researchers studied 61 Navajos who have ingested peyote at least 100 times, then compared their scores with 79 Navajos who reported minimal use of the substance and 36 tribe members who are recovering alcoholics.

The study found that peyote users scored better on measures of mental health indicators, including anxiety, depression, behavioral control and psychological distress. Researchers were unable to find any long-term negative effects.

Researchers cautioned, however, that the high scores may actually be tied to membership in a close-knit religious community, not the drug. "From our data, we cannot say what the effects of peyote might be in any other group," said Dr. Harrison Pope, director of McLean's biological psychiatry laboratory. *-Religion News Service*