

LA BioMed Launches Study of MDMA-Assisted Therapy for Social Anxiety in Autistic Adults

MAPS Initiates Research Seeking to Enhance Functional Skills

LOS ANGELES – (March 27, 2014) – Seeking new therapies for the treatment of social anxiety in autistic adults, researchers at the Los Angeles Biomedical Research Institute (LA BioMed) announced today that they are initiating a novel study into the safety and effectiveness of MDMA-assisted therapy.

The study is the latest in an expanding program of research into the therapeutic use of MDMA by the nonprofit Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS). The research seeks to examine effective treatments for adults on the autism spectrum, who often face social adaptability challenges and greater anxiety, depression, and victimization than typically developing adults.

Conventional prescription medication that may help other adults is often ineffective in autistic adults. Moreover, difficulties in establishing a rapport with a therapist can interfere with conventional psychotherapy.

“We know we need new supportive treatments, and we have anecdotal evidence that autistic adults who had experimented with MDMA experienced a reduction in anxiety and an increased confidence in their abilities to interact socially,” said Charles Grob, MD, LA BioMed’s lead researcher for the study. “We also have been impressed with the results of other MAPS-sponsored MDMA-assisted psychotherapy research, which has demonstrated clinical improvement in patients with chronic posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). With our current study, we will administer MDMA in a carefully controlled environment to establish the safety and efficacy of MDMA-assisted therapy in a small sample of autistic adults with social anxiety.”

MDMA (3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine) is a synthetic compound first developed by the Merck pharmaceutical company in 1912. Therapists began to explore MDMA’s use in therapeutic settings in the 1970s, including to reduce moderate depression and anxiety among their adult patients.

Legal therapeutic use came to a halt in 1985 when MDMA was criminalized as a result of widespread recreational use. Illegally manufactured “Ecstasy” or “Molly” is usually adulterated and often contains no MDMA.

Alicia Danforth, PhD, an LA BioMed researcher for the study, has previously conducted interviews with numerous adults on the autism spectrum who have taken MDMA recreationally and reported a reduction in social anxiety. She reported that 72% of the more than 100 autistic adults she surveyed reported feeling “more comfort in social settings” as a result of using MDMA recreationally and 77% found it “easier than usual to talk with others.” In some cases, she said, these effects lasted a year or more. But she pointed out that the recreational drugs identified as MDMA, or “Ecstasy,” may not necessarily contain MDMA.

“This new study will give us a chance to determine the actual effects of differing dosages of medication that we know for certain is pure MDMA on adults on the autism spectrum,” she said. “If the results of this research warrant further investigation, data from this study will be used to design additional clinical trials.”

The randomized, double-blind and placebo-controlled pilot study will assess the safety and feasibility of MDMA-assisted therapy to treat social anxiety in 12 autistic adults who have not previously taken MDMA.

MDMA-assisted therapy combines therapeutic techniques with the administration of MDMA, which may enhance or amplify aspects of therapy. The treatment model will focus on developing a therapeutic relationship with the research volunteers within a supportive environment in which they can learn and practice social skills.

“We know from other research findings that MDMA can reduce activity in the portion of the brain that communicates the fear that can lead to social anxiety,” said Dr. Grob. “Other studies also found MDMA can increase oxytocin, a neuropeptide associated with bonding and social affiliation in humans, which could also be beneficial to adults on the autism spectrum.”

The study will also measure the level of oxytocin in the blood to help determine whether MDMA increases the secretion of oxytocin and what role, if any, this increased secretion of oxytocin may play in improving therapeutic outcomes.

The study is being conducted in collaboration with researchers at Stanford University. It has approval from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, in addition to LA BioMed’s Institutional Review Board, and will be funded by donations from MAPS.

To learn more or download the study protocol, visit mdma-autism.org.

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About LA BioMed

Founded in 1952, LA BioMed is one of the country's leading nonprofit independent biomedical research institutes. It has approximately 100 principal researchers conducting studies into improved diagnostics and treatments for cancer, inherited diseases, infectious diseases, illnesses caused by environmental factors and more. It also educates young scientists and provides community services, including prenatal counseling and childhood nutrition programs. LA BioMed is academically affiliated with the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA and located on the campus of Harbor-UCLA Medical Center. For more information, visit LABioMed.org

About MAPS

Founded in 1986, MAPS is a 501(c)(3) non-profit research and educational organization that develops medical, legal and cultural contexts for people to benefit from the careful uses of psychedelics and marijuana. For more information, visit maps.org.