

Study finds 79% of Canadians support the therapeutic use of psilocybin for people at the end of life

January 23 2024



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Nearly 4 out of 5 Canadians believe that the use of psilocybin, the active ingredient in hallucinogenic mushrooms, is an acceptable medical

approach to treat existential distress in patients suffering from a serious and incurable disease. This is the main conclusion of an online survey of 2,800 people conducted by a research team led by Michel Dorval, professor at Université Laval's Faculty of Pharmacy and researcher at the CHU de Québec-Université Laval Research Center. The results have been [published](#) in the journal *Palliative Medicine*.

The main objective of the survey was to measure the degree of social acceptability of this intervention when delivered by health care professionals. "Studies have already shown that psilocybin, combined with psychotherapy, produces rapid, robust and lasting anxiolytic and antidepressant effects in patients suffering from advanced cancer," says Professor Dorval. "This substance can bring about a profound awareness that leads the patient to view existence from a different perspective. Treatment with psilocybin, combined with psychotherapy, can produce relief for up to six months."

Canadian law currently prohibits the production, sale or possession of psilocybin. Since January 2022, however, a special access program has made it possible to obtain an exemption from Health Canada for medical or scientific reasons. A doctor can apply on behalf of a patient if psychotherapy, antidepressants or anxiolytics have failed, or if the patient's condition requires urgent intervention.

Researchers surveyed 1,000 residents of Québec and 1,800 residents of Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia to find out their opinion on the potential easing of rules surrounding the medical use of psilocybin. Analysis of their answers shows that 79% of respondents consider psilocybin-assisted therapy a reasonable medical choice to treat existential distress in patients at the end of life.

"Our results seem to indicate that the social acceptability of this intervention is high in the Canadian population," comments Professor

Dorval. "If we consider only Québec respondents, the acceptability rate is similar to the national average."

Support for psilocybin is higher among respondents who have already been exposed to palliative care. "Having been close to loved ones at the [end of life](#), or having witnessed their distress, could explain this openness to new approaches designed to help people at this stage of their life," suggests Dorval.

Support is also higher among respondents who have already used [psilocybin](#). "There are still many prejudices against [psychedelic substances](#), says the researcher. Familiarity with these substances probably helps to better understand their true effects as well as their therapeutic potential."

This study was carried out as part of Louis Plourde's doctoral research at Université Laval's Faculty of Pharmacy. Researchers from McGill University, Université de Montréal and UQAR co-authored the article published in *Palliative Medicine*.

More information: Louis Plourde et al, Social acceptability of psilocybin-assisted therapy for existential distress at the end of life: A population-based survey, *Palliative Medicine* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/02692163231222430](#)

Provided by Laval University

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