

The Wayback Machine - <https://web.archive.org/web/20200229091407/https://www.thestranger.com/featur...>

theStranger

♥ MENU ≡

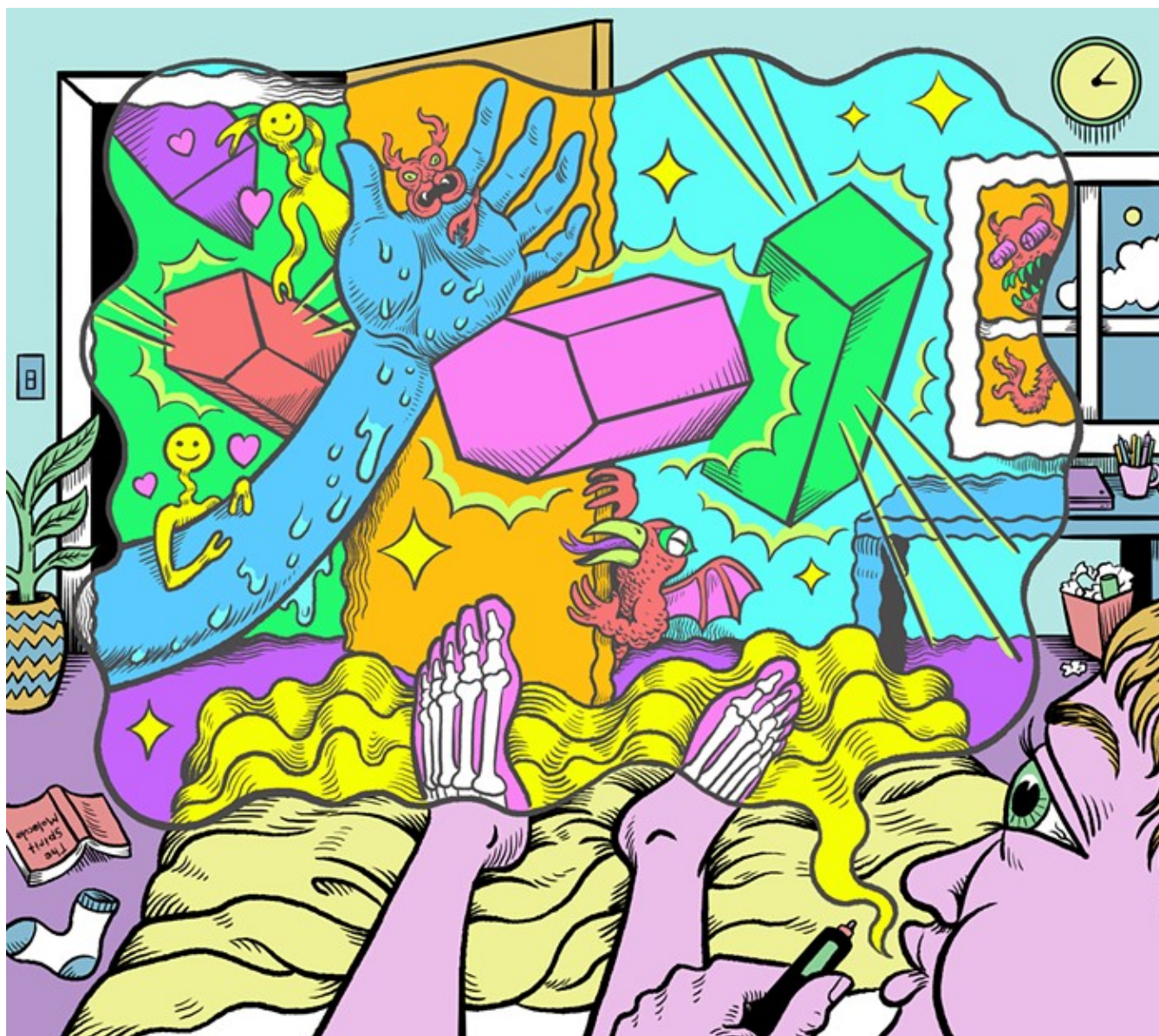
FEATURES

AUG 15, 2018

New on the Black Market: Vape Pens Full of DMT

Is vaping the most powerful psychedelic in the world a good idea? Only one way to find out.

by [Lester Black](#)



LAUREN KOLESINSKAS

The first time I heard about vape pens filled with DMT, I was completely dumbfounded.

I was at a bar in Fremont with a friend when, after a few drinks, he mentioned that he had recently bought a vaporizer cartridge filled with the drug.

DMT? The strongest psychedelic in the world? WTF?

Found in the ayahuasca tea made by the native people of the Amazon, and also produced naturally in our bodies, dimethyltryptamine (DMT), if ingested correctly, will send you into an overwhelming out-of-body experience that lasts less than half an hour in conventional time but is said to feel like a lifetime. A significant portion of users report encountering small elves when they are hallucinating on DMT.

Now this powerful psychedelic drug was being packaged in vape pens? Does this mean people can now trip on DMT anywhere and everywhere, from the back of a bus to a break at work?

I had never tried DMT before. But I write about drugs for *The Stranger*. I needed to try this thing.

My friend didn't have his DMT vape pen on him, probably smart considering it's illegal, but I left the bar that night resolved to try one of these DMT vapes in the future.

I didn't have to wait long.

A week later, I was visiting a friend at his rooftop lounge in Pioneer Square, on one of those glassy new buildings so close to CenturyLink Field that you can see the Seahawks play without leaving the building. I casually mentioned what I had heard in the bar in Fremont. "You're not going to believe this," I said, "but I know someone who has a vape pen filled with DMT."

I said it because I thought this particular friend might be into that sort of thing. Much to my surprise, he said: "So do I. Let's go downstairs."

We took the elevator down to his apartment, where succulents and important-looking crystals covered nearly every surface. My friend disappeared into a back room for a moment. His dog looked me in the eyes and barked. Then my friend returned with a white cloth wrapped around something the size of a small book. He unwrapped the cloth and showed me about a dozen cartridges, each one about an inch long, carefully packaged in individual glass tubes.

"If you want to write about this, you need to try it. Here, take one. I only trade

psychedelics; I won't sell them. So just give me something else in return when you get a chance."

I was now holding a cartridge filled with DMT. "You may or may not break through the first couple of times," my friend said. "It's like a dream. You have to write everything down or talk to someone right after, because otherwise everything will just go away."

In the past, I've had multiple opportunities to smoke DMT crystals, the version of DMT that is somewhat widely available on the black market, but I've said no thanks every time. There was always a good reason not to—the people who had it seemed sketchy or untrustworthy, the moment wasn't right for a possibly life-altering psychedelic trip full of elves or tunnels of light—but here I was with DMT from someone I trusted. It was packaged in a highly convenient form. There's something about the sleek, modern convenience of a vape cartridge that made the whole thing seem very palatable.

I promised my friend I would repay him with some psilocybin-laced mushroom chocolates that a friend makes, and off I went. I left his apartment and walked back into the weekday bustle of Pioneer Square, a cartridge filled with DMT in my bag.

*

I sat on the futon couch wedged into the corner of my bedroom and held the cartridge of DMT in front of me. I reached for my weed vape pen, unscrewed the cartridge filled with pot, and replaced it with the cartridge filled with DMT. I held the pen in my hand, ready to bring it to my mouth, but I was nervous and alone, and I let my arm fall to my side without taking a hit.

I got up and put on some music and lit some incense.

I sat back down and quickly put the vape pen to my mouth, not letting myself contemplate what I was about to do. I held the button down and started to breathe in deeply. The hit tasted horrible, like burnt oil and burning rubber mixed with the stale smell of an old person's house. I exhaled a thick cloud and waited. Nothing at first. I looked at my phone and 10 seconds passed. The timer clicked over to 15 seconds, and still nothing.

Then things started to melt.

The bed in front of me seemed to breathe, inhaling and exhaling like a lung. The unkempt sheets appeared to grow and fall like a cresting wave. I looked around, but it became too tiring to focus on my oscillating furniture, so I closed my eyes and felt my body fall away. I couldn't tell if I wasn't in control of my arms and legs or if I had just completely lost interest in controlling them. I saw prisms of purple and white light,

extending into infinity, behind my closed eyelids.

"I'll stay like this for 10 seconds and then open my eyes and check on my cresting furniture," I thought. After what I thought was 10 seconds passed, I opened my eyes and saw that four minutes on my recorder had gone by.

My palms were covered in sweat. It felt like a heavy blanket was pushing against every joint in my body. I could move again, but the weight was almost painful. After another 10 minutes had passed (now almost 15 minutes total after I took the hit), my body felt like it had been returned to me. No more severe heaviness. My furniture stabilized in front of me.

While my trip was intense, my mind was never overcome. I felt like I was in mental control even when I lost control of my limbs and the room swirled like mixing paint in front of me. I saw no elves. I had not "broken through," as they say.

*

Dr. Rick Strassman has studied DMT more closely than anyone else in the world. Strassman didn't discover DMT, nor was he the first person to see its use. The drug has been used for centuries by native people in the Amazon, who extract it out of a plant before brewing it into ayahuasca tea. But Strassman was the first person to conduct rigorous human trials on the drug. His clinical trials on DMT in the 1990s, along with his book *DMT: The Spirit Molecule* and the documentary of the same name, are largely responsible for introducing DMT to the modern world.

All of which is why I was somewhat nervous the first time I told him that the drug, a compound he's spent his professional life closely testing, was now carelessly floating around Seattle in vape pens.

Do you want to support *The Stranger*? Contribute here.

Strassman paused for a minute after I told him about the vape pens, then discouraged the idea: "I would be alarmed. I wouldn't want one of my kids coming home with a vape pen of DMT. It's a bit too easy. It's just a little too casual," he said. "It would lead to casual use of DMT, which I don't think is a good idea."

Strassman also questioned whether a vape pen would get hot enough to deliver the appropriate amount of DMT quickly enough to send someone into a classic "breakthrough" trip. He said delivering too little DMT too slowly would render a very different trip than a full dose. "If you take a full dose of DMT, you can't move, you can't

talk, and you are out of your body," Strassman said. "It's completely mind-blowing. It is a huge experience. But if you take a small dose... people can function on small doses, they can talk and interact."

When Strassman started his clinical trials on DMT at the University of New Mexico in 1990, Western science had no protocol for how to dose humans with DMT. He started by injecting the DMT intramuscularly, but he soon realized he would need to inject the drug directly into his volunteers' veins. With no baseline for how the volunteers would react, he worried he would overdose and kill the first volunteers he injected.

Strassman proceeded to give more than 400 doses of intravenous DMT to almost 60 volunteers during his five-year study. No one overdosed or died—at least not in the physical sense.

Some of his subjects reported having near-death experiences when they were tripping. One subject, referred to as Sean in Strassman's book, said, "I think I've learned what it's like to die, to be completely helpless in the throes of something. That's been helpful."

Another volunteer in his study, a 39-year-old woman named Willow, reported passing through a series of long tunnels of light with large beings at her side. About 25 minutes after taking a large dose of DMT, she told Strassman, "It's a very enchanting place. I almost don't want to leave it."

"There were gremlins, small, faces mostly. They had wings and tails and stuff. I paid them little attention. The larger beings were there to sustain and support me. That was their realm... The tall beings were loving, smiling, and serene," Strassman records her saying in his *Spirit Molecule* book.

More than half of the subjects in Strassman's study reported interacting with intelligent beings when they tripped on DMT. It happened with such startling consistency that he describes the occurrence of such beings as "the most unusual and difficult to understand" aspect of his clinical work.

Many of the volunteers described the beings they encountered as elves. Karl, a 45-year-old volunteer in the study, told Strassman he saw four elves that were "prankish, ornery," and appeared on a stretch of interstate he regularly drives.

"They commanded the scene, it was their terrain! They were about my height. They held up placards, showing me these incredibly beautiful, complex, swirling geometric scenes in them. One of them made it impossible for me to move... I heard a giggling sound—the elves laughing or talking at high-speed volume, chattering, twittering," Karl told Strassman.

When Willow took a second large dose of DMT later in the study, she saw the tall beings again. She told Strassman as she was coming down from DMT's high: "It's like a cosmic joke. If we all knew what was waiting for us, we'd all kill ourselves. That's why we stay in this form for so long, to figure that out... Everyone should try a high dose of DMT once. I don't know if the beings today were saying 'Try death once' or 'Try life once.' That place is so full and so complete that the idea of this place is to try and be as complete as possible."

Strassman saw a connection between the beings people encountered on the DMT trips and reports of alien abduction. Just like a DMT trip, alien-abduction stories frequently start with bright lights and paralysis. Plus, there were many physical similarities between the spirits people see on a DMT trip and the "aliens" that people report being abducted by. This led Strassman to theorize that humans experience alien abduction when they have temporarily raised levels of DMT in their body.

Where does the DMT in our bodies come from? Strassman theorizes that it is produced in a tiny fingernail-sized gland in our brains called the pineal gland. It's the only organ in our brain that doesn't have a left and right version like our lobes. There is only one pineal gland. René Descartes, the 17th-century French philosopher of "I think, therefore I am" fame, thought the pineal gland was the source of our senses and thoughts. Descartes considered our faculty to think proof that we have a soul—so it was the pineal gland, he thought, that is the source of our soul.

Nearly 400 years after Descartes theorized about the gland, scientists are still trying to understand its role in humans. Strassman's theory, which is far from proven but is backed up by research, is that the pineal gland produces psychedelic amounts of DMT during key life events—including during the moment we are born, during near-death experiences, when we dream, during deep prayer or meditation, and at the moment we die. It is because of this that Strassman theorizes that DMT is the "spirit molecule," a compound that carries with it our spirit and access to the spiritual world.

This is where Strassman's research becomes more theoretical than clinical, but there is some evidence to back up his claims. The pineal gland contains all of the necessary precursor chemicals to synthesize DMT. Strassman, along with other researchers, found evidence of DMT in the pineal glands of rats in 2013. DMT has been found in newborn animals, but no scientists have published studies examining newborn human brains for DMT levels.

Even if there isn't scientific certainty that DMT carries our human spirit, it has been used for hundreds of years as a tool for spiritual exploration since people first started brewing ayahuasca tea and sharing it in religious ceremonies.

Many of Strassman's subjects said they volunteered for the study because they were interested in psychedelics as a way to examine and spiritually reevaluate their life, something that has grown only more popular since Strassman's work in the 1990s. Americans and Europeans flock to South America to drink ayahuasca at lodges created specifically for the trips. There are now illegal ayahuasca clinics in Brooklyn that charge \$150 for a session of DMT. Celebrities such as Lindsay Lohan, Sting, and Tori Amos have publicly extolled the benefits of the drug.

I've found some spiritual benefit in psychedelics. It was during a particularly heavy mushroom trip five years ago that I realized the cruelty of eating meat and became a vegetarian. And the promise of huge experiences with DMT has always attracted me. But it wasn't until I saw that DMT vape cartridge that I really felt comfortable trying this "spirit molecule."

*

Gas Works Park feels like it was designed as a place to take psychedelic drugs. The park sits on a green, grassy thumb that juts out into Lake Union from the north. A view of Seattle's skyline backdrops a constant mixing of sailboats and seaplanes taking off and landing. A steep, soft knoll rises in the center of the park, like a viewing platform.

I asked my friend who first told me about the vape pens to meet me there. It was the best place I could think of to try the DMT cartridge again. We both arrived late on a sunny, hot Monday evening in July. The park was crowded, but we found a space on the knoll, looking south toward the Space Needle. The seaplanes pointed toward us as they darted across the lake and into the air.

My friend brought his own DMT cartridge attached to a vaporizer designed for e-cigarettes, as opposed to my vape, which is intended for cannabis cartridges. We hoped his cartridge would heat the DMT to a higher temperature, deliver a stronger dose, and get me closer to breaking through and meeting some elves.

I held his vape and started to take a deep, slow breath. His cartridge tasted less offensive than mine. I took three hits before the shuddering heaviness of the trip made my hand fall to my side. The distance between me and the boats in the water suddenly reduced to almost nothing. It was like sitting in a bathtub with toy sailboats floating around me. The color of the water became deeper and more magnificent. I didn't just see the boats navigating around each other; I could feel their overlapping movement and each rock of their hulls in the water.

When I had been on my couch, I couldn't keep my eyes open—but here at Gas Works, I couldn't stop looking. My eyes were locked on the lake. When I looked down at my timer,

more than two minutes had passed. Within three minutes, the heavy feeling increased, but my visual trip reduced to a more minor effect. Within 10 minutes, only some lingering heaviness remained.

Again, I hadn't broken though. The visuals were intense and overwhelming, but I didn't exit my body, reevaluate existence, or see any beings.

After the weight of the DMT left us, we started to compare our vape cartridges. Because he has never met my friend in Pioneer Square, and because the oil in his cartridge was noticeably lighter in color than mine, it seemed like we had gotten our cartridges from different sources, or at least different batches. His cartridge was large in volume and its oil flowed around easily, while the oil in mine was more viscous. We surmised his might be cut with something, possibly propylene glycol, a popular additive to vape pens that makes the oil burn more quickly and smoothly.

Not knowing the direct source for either of the cartridges, I started to wonder if I was even smoking DMT, or if it was just some kind of research chemical. With no legal way to bring the vape cartridge to a lab and have it tested, there was no way to confirm what was in it.

We stood up and walked to the other side of the hill, this time looking west toward the Fremont Bridge and the setting sun. I took out my vape cartridge and turned the temperature up to its highest setting and started to breathe in. It tasted noticeably worse after trying my friend's DMT cartridge. I tried to break through this time, tried to take in as much as I could, breathing long and deep. But after four hits, the horrid flavor and the beginning of the heavy sensation stopped me from hitting it again.

An audible shift hit my ears almost immediately, like a whoosh. I suddenly heard almost nothing but the people talking around me and the sound of someone mumbling incoherently on a speaker coming from a police boat.

I looked down in front of me and saw tall leaves of grass turn into an infinitely repeated geometric pattern. My peripheral vision went away. All I could concentrate on was this pattern of the sun's light reflecting through the grass.

When I finally did look away, three minutes had passed and that now familiar feeling of heaviness returned. I didn't see any elves or white tunnels of light. I didn't break through.

*

It's impossible to talk about DMT, or really any mind-altering drug, without talking about its legality. We are nearly a century into the criminalization of drugs. By the time

my parents became adults in the 1970s and 1980s, the war on drugs, officially declared by Richard Nixon (but started decades earlier and then later perfected by Ronald Reagan), had put a criminal lens on any kind of mind-altering substance.

DMT was a victim of that time period. From the 1950s to the 1970s, DMT was actively studied by the medical community. After all, it was found in human tissue and the human brain. Its role in psychiatric disorders and treatment was studied by psychologists. But then, in 1970, the American government put it in the most criminal class of drugs, essentially starving DMT of research grants or academic access.

Strassman was the first researcher to bring the scientific lens back to DMT, but it took years for his study to get approval. His research yielded fascinating results and provided methods of rigorously studying psychedelics that are now commonly used in the medical community. What kind of understanding of our world or possible medical therapies did we lose by burying DMT for so many decades and continuing to make it illegal?

I think it's easy to make the case that DMT should be accessible to any scientist or medical doctor who can prove they know how to handle it safely. But what about this vape pen of DMT I've been carrying around? Is there any good reason to allow this kind of drug proliferation and experimentation?

"These are powerful drugs, and they have got to be administered by people who know what they are doing," Strassman said. "You can't just let anybody prescribe these drugs willy-nilly. I don't think making them widely available is a good idea."

I have to say, I'm with Strassman. After experiencing the shuddering hit of DMT and its ability to check you out of life, I am not an advocate of legalizing DMT or seeing these psychedelic vape cartridges used widely. Psychedelics can be abused just like any other drug. I have known people to pour out pools of LSD into their cupped hands and lick it up, or eat mushrooms day after day, as a way to check out of their life and problems. A vape pen of DMT, even with its short trip, could easily enable abuse.

The vape hits also never created, for me, the kind of deeply beneficial trip that is the allure of DMT in the first place. I'm not sure if it was just the small doses a vape pen gives, or the temperature, or the quality of the DMT in the cartridges I tried, but I never "broke through" or found the spiritual beings I was hoping to encounter.

At one point during my conversation with Strassman, while he was explaining mainstream psychologists' reluctance to study DMT, he made a claim that struck me: "If there's anything psychedelics can teach us, it's that we don't have imagination enough to know what we are missing."

I'm still missing the elves. ★



 32

Lester Black



Lester Black is a staff writer for The Stranger, where he writes about Seattle news, cannabis, and beer. He is sometimes sober.



You might also be interested in these:

King County Just Gave Free Bus Tickets to 54,000 Residents

by [Lester Black](#)

Steve Luke, Founder of Cloudburst Brewing, Nominated For James Beard Award

by [Lester Black](#)

The Latest Move to Repair the Racist War on Drugs Could new pot shops be part of the answer?

by [Lester Black](#)



theStranger

All contents © Index Newspapers LLC
1535 11th Ave (Third Floor), Seattle, WA 98122

[Contact](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Takedown Policy](#)