Natural highs [1]

Dear Alice,

Is there a natural way to get high?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Altering your state of mind, improving your outlook, changing interpretations, reaching a transcendental state, feeling euphoric, getting blazed, buzzed, baked, rolling, tripping, candy flipping… the list goes on — whatever you call it or whatever it means to you, “getting high” is a concept that's existed throughout history and across cultures. Today, it's often associated with ingesting a substance to alter feelings, shift thoughts, or incite visions. Pursuing a high without ingesting a mind-altering substance may produce similar feelings without some of the risks associated with drug use.

Regardless of the high’s origins, the effects of being high originate in the same place — the brain. Neurotransmitters are generally responsible for feelings of euphoria or contentment, and drugs people use to get high work by increasing levels of neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, serotonin, and norepinephrine, in the brain. For example, tetrahydrocannabinoid (THC), found in marijuana, engages with the CB1 receptor in the endocannabinoid system to create euphoria and pain relief. The endocannabinoid system is the neurological system that’s activated by cannabis and other experiences, and it also helps with feelings of relaxation, among other functions. However, the anandamides, also known as the “bliss molecules,” produced during intense physical activity engage with the same receptor, resulting in a similar level of relaxation and happiness as with THC.

While naturally-occurring, mind-altering substances abound, consuming an organic, rather than a manufactured, compound doesn’t guarantee that it's safe; there are plenty of poisons in nature. So how might you induce euphoric or relaxed feelings that are low risk and without ingesting substances? Several known ways that don't involve ingesting, injecting, or inhaling anything include:

- **Physical activity**, such as running and other forms of intense cardiovascular activity, may
alter the brain in pleasant ways. Along with anandamides, norepenephrine and serotonin increase after physical activity, leading to the sensation that’s sometimes called a “runner’s high.” Check out the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition & Physical Activity archives for more neurotransmitter-inducing ideas.

- **Acupuncture** [3], **meditation, and yoga** may produce a high-like feeling by activating the endocannabinoid system. These activities have been linked to relaxation and altered consciousness.

- **Orgasms** [4], sex, and masturbation may produce a feeling of euphoria by engaging with the endocannabinoid system and producing dopamine. Additionally, a study on women found that an orgasm decreases activation of the frontal lobe, creating a feeling of disinhibition that’s similar to the feeling some people experience with certain drugs. What a lovely added bonus to other pleasurable sensations that come along with sex!

- **Sensory reduction**, a stress management strategy that focuses on reducing stimuli in the environment in the form of flotation tanks, has been found effective in decreasing negative mental states such as depression, stress and anxiety. Could be worth a try!

- **Thrill-inducing activities** such as extreme sports, roller coasters, or other activities that engage the fight-or-flight response release adrenaline and osteocalcin, which in turn, put the body in a high alert mode. Thrills can cause some people (think “adrenaline junkies”) to exhibit higher levels of dopamine in their brains.

These are just some of the commonly documented methods to get high naturally. Other possibilities may involve art, nature, spending time with other people, taking care of yourself, learning, traveling, altruistic endeavors, and spirituality, among many other activities and experiences. As you explore, you may find that what works wonders for one person may not work the same for you. Your imagination is the limit to achieving natural highs!

Alice!
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