Nutmeg is an egg-shaped seed of *Myristica fragrans*, a tree growing in the Banda Islands (Moluccas; Indonesia). It is about 20 to 30 mm (0.8 to 1.2 in) long and 15 to 18 mm (0.6 to 0.7 in) wide and weighs between 5 and 10 g (0.2 and 0.4 oz) dried.

Despite the risk of death, nutmeg remained popular among women who wanted to abort, particularly in London, where they were called “Nutmeg ladies” (EMBODEN W. Narcotic Plants. New York: MacMillan Publishing Co, 1979)

In the 16th century, slaves consumed nutmeg as a sedative to better withstand the rigors of transport by ship. It was also used as abortifacient in Europe, but not without danger: in 1576, French botanist and physician Mathias Lobel, in his book *Plantarum seu stirpium historia*, related a case in which a woman was rendered delirious by nutmegs.

The “drug” was also widely used in American prisons as an alternative to alcohol. In 1946, in Charlestown, someone gave Malcolm “X” Little a matchbox of nutmeg powder to mix in a glass of water. According to Cliff Bennet (federal prison; Danbury): “So much nutmeg and ginger disappeared from the kitchen that the authorities put them under lock and key.”

In his book *Naked Lunch* (1959), the American writer William Burroughs also mentioned that sailors ate nutmeg.

6 hours after ingestion, the seed causes dry mouth, stomach pain, vomiting, sweats, double vision and persistent headaches. Nonetheless the “drug” became popular among students. In 1959, Robert M. (Yale University) gulped two tablespoons of nutmeg in water; “Around coffee time, I very suddenly felt as if someone had “slipped a Mickey” (as they used to say). I barely made it back to my room and my bed. My buddies all went out to a movie. I then had alarming dreams, which I later learned to describe as “psychadelic” Giant clanking machines made of copper! Then, I was drifting down through the hole in a giant alabaster dome! Down below, I could see pillows in vivid colors like turquoise, magenta and saffron!”


According to Braun and Kalbhen (University of Bonn, Germany), this phenylpropene is metabolised by the liver to 3-Methoxy-4,5-methylenedioxyamphetamine (MDMA; 3-Methoxy-MDA), a psychedelic and entactogen drug (BRAUN U., KALBHEN DA. Evidence for the Biogenic Formation of Amphetamine Derivatives from Components of Nutmeg. Pharmacology, 1973, vol. 9, n° 5, pp. 312-6).

Many cases of nutmeg-poisoning with hallucinations have been reported in the scientific literature since the beginning of the 20th century. In 2010, 67 cases of poisoning have been reported in U.S.A. and American newspapers (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, New York Post), television broadcasters (ABC in Miami, ABC in Tampa, CNN), radio (WSB in Atlanta) launched alerts about nutmeg eating.

Each year, thousands of cases are reported, in particular in the English-speaking countries, and the death of a teenager in the UK in 2006 caused a wave of media attention. It is now believed that the high rate of poisonings is due to the increased availability of nutmeg powder in the form of “spice.”

However, this figure is probably underestimated (videos about nutmeg eating or smoking have been posted on YouTube). In Saudi Arabia, nutmeg is prohibited. In Russia and Sweden, some cases of nutmeg poisoning have been recently reported. In France, the “drug” has also a following.