



# Hallucinogen drug testing: What family law professionals need to know

**Mário Barroso, Head of R&D and Method Development at AlphaBiolabs**, discusses what family law professionals need to know about hallucinogens, from the main hallucinogenic drugs encountered in family proceedings, to their effects and the testing options available

While often perceived as less harmful than other Class A drugs, hallucinogens remain a persistent feature of the UK drug landscape. According to Office for National Statistics (ONS) data, approximately 1.1% of adults aged 16 to 59 in England and Wales reported using hallucinogens in the year ending March 2025, a figure that has remained broadly stable year on year.

Of particular concern is the sharp rise in ketamine use. Although classified as a Class B drug, ketamine can produce powerful hallucinogenic effects, and the number of adults entering treatment for ketamine problems has risen to more than 12 times the number recorded a decade ago.

## What are hallucinogens?

Hallucinogens are a broad category of psychoactive substances that alter perception, mood and cognition, primarily by disrupting serotonin activity in the brain.

They fall into two categories: **classic hallucinogens**, which produce hallucinations and altered perception, and **dissociative hallucinogens**, which produce feelings of detachment from reality.

**Ketamine** (Class B), a dissociative anaesthetic with legitimate medical and veterinary uses, blocks NMDA receptors and can produce vivid hallucinations at higher doses.

Class A hallucinogens include:

- ▶ **LSD** – a potent semi-synthetic compound that can produce effects lasting 8-12 hours

- ▶ **Magic mushrooms** – contain psilocybin, with effects lasting 4-6 hours
- ▶ **PCP** – formerly a surgical anaesthetic and can cause extreme agitation and psychosis at higher doses
- ▶ **Mescaline** – found in several species of cactus including the peyote cactus
- ▶ **DMT** – a fast-acting compound often consumed as part of the plant-based brew, ayahuasca

Effects are unpredictable and vary by dose and individual. A parent or carer under the influence may be unable to respond appropriately to a child's needs or recognise danger in the moment, while regular use is linked to longer-term risks including persistent psychosis, Hallucinogen Persisting Perception Disorder (HPPD), and lasting anxiety or depression, all of which are relevant when assessing parenting capacity.

## Hallucinogens in legal proceedings

Hallucinogens are not always the primary substance concern in family proceedings, but are increasingly encountered as part of a broader pattern of drug misuse.

## Detection windows

Narrow-window tests such as oral fluid or urine may only capture very recent use. However, hair and nail testing can detect use for up to 12 months, making them the most reliable methods for establishing a longer-term pattern.

Where broader drug use is a concern, oral fluid or urine testing alongside hair or nail testing helps build a fuller picture.

## Poly-drug use & non-standard panels

LSD, magic mushrooms, PCP, mescaline, and DMT are not routinely included in standard panels, meaning their presence can go undetected unless specifically instructed.

At AlphaBiolabs, ketamine is part of our top nine court-ordered standard panel, whilst all other hallucinogens can be requested via our non-standard panel.

## Side effects

Conditions such as persistent psychosis and HPPD can significantly affect a person's mental health, behaviour, and ability to provide safe, consistent care.

However, these conditions can overlap considerably with those of other substances and some mental health conditions, meaning they cannot be relied upon to determine which substances to test for. Comprehensive, targeted drug testing is the most reliable way to establish hallucinogen use as a factor.

## Expert hallucinogen drug testing

AlphaBiolabs is a UKAS 17025-accredited laboratory (Lab 51 extension for toxicology), with over 20 years' experience supporting family law professionals, social workers and local authorities.

We test for the widest range of hallucinogens with sample collections from any location within 24-48 hours of instruction, FREE sample collections for legally-instructed tests at our nationwide walk-in centres, and rapid results from our UK laboratory.

*To request a quote or discuss the requirements of your particular case, contact our New Enquiry team on 0333 600 1300, email [testing@alphabiolabs.com](mailto:testing@alphabiolabs.com), or complete our online quote form at <https://www.alphabiolabs.co.uk/legal-test-forms/>.*

## Mário Barroso, Head of R&D and Method Development at AlphaBiolabs

Mário leads AlphaBiolabs' technical team on developing and improving testing methods.

Prior to joining AlphaBiolabs, Mário spent 20 years as a Forensic Toxicologist at the Portuguese National Institute of Forensic Medicine, where he developed and implemented hair testing services.

He also sits on the Administration Board of the Society of Hair Testing.

