

Growing Support for Legal Use

Marijuana is the most widely used illicit drug in the United States. Although federal law still bans it, almost half of states allow medical marijuana, and voters in Alaska, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, and the District of Columbia have passed initiatives making recreational use legal for adults. More states have such laws in the works. With pot more accessible than ever, it is important to understand how using it can affect your health.

Immediate Effects on the Brain

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is a mind-altering chemical that occurs naturally in the cannabis plant. Marijuana users most commonly smoke the dried leaves or inhale their vapors. They may also mix the dried leaves in food or smoke a resin extracted from the plant. However marijuana enters the body, the bloodstream carries THC to the brain, where it temporarily overactivates parts of the mind involved in sensations, memory, movement, and other functions.

Reaction to More Potent THC a Risk for New Users

A steady increase in THC levels over the past few decades has made cannabis plants more potent than they used to be. This means new users are especially at risk of dangerous reactions to the drug. In recent years, annual emergency room visits related to marijuana use were estimated at more than 376,000.

Yes, It Is Addictive

Regular exposure to high doses of THC can lead to addiction. Research suggests that about 1 in 11 marijuana users become addicted, but these numbers are higher for those who use it daily and people who start in their teens.

Mental Health Impact

Long-term use of marijuana has been linked to mental health problems, including depression and anxiety. In teens, it may be associated with suicidal thoughts. Some users experience temporary

hallucinations and bouts of paranoia, and in people with schizophrenia, marijuana use can make symptoms worse.

Special Concerns for Teens

A recent survey of middle and high school students found that an increasing number of kids believe pot is not dangerous. However, research shows that marijuana affects brain development. Heavy marijuana use in the teen years can cause problems with thinking, memory and learning that could become permanent.

Pregnancy and Pot

If a pregnant woman uses marijuana, it may affect the developing brain of her fetus. Researchers have linked marijuana use during pregnancy to brain and behavioral problems in babies.

Not Smart for Your Heart

Marijuana doesn't just go to your brain. Using marijuana sends THC circulating throughout the body. This increases your heart rate, raising the risk of a heart attack, especially in older adults and those with preexisting heart conditions.

Effects on Breathing

Heavy marijuana smokers can have the same breathing problems as cigarette smokers. These include frequent coughing, excess phlegm, and a higher risk of lung infections. Researchers are not sure if marijuana smoking leads to lung cancer.

Marijuana as Medicine

Multiple studies have shown that using marijuana can be helpful for treating certain types of pain as well as the muscle contractions and sudden movements of multiple sclerosis. There also is research into another marijuana chemical, cannabidiol (CBD), as a treatment for epilepsy and other conditions. However, using medical marijuana may carry the same side effects and risks as recreational marijuana. If you're considering medical marijuana, talk with your doctor about the risks and benefits.