

MYTH 1

Marijuana is harmless.

Marijuana harms in many ways, and kids are the most vulnerable to its damaging effects. Use of the drug can lead to significant health, safety, social, and learning or behavioral problems, especially for young users. Making matters worse is the fact that the marijuana available today is more potent than ever.

Short-term effects of marijuana use include memory loss, distorted perception, trouble with thinking and problem-solving, and anxiety. Students who use marijuana may find it hard to learn,⁴ thus jeopardizing their ability to achieve their full potential.

COGNITIVE IMPAIRMENT

That marijuana can cause problems with concentration and thinking has been shown in research funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the federal agency that brings the power of science to bear on drug abuse and addiction. A NIDA-funded study at McLean Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts, is part of the growing body of research documenting cognitive impairment among heavy marijuana users.⁵ The study found that college students who used marijuana regularly had impaired skills related to attention, memory, and learning 24 hours after they last used the drug.

Another study, conducted at the University of Iowa College of Medicine, found that people who used marijuana frequently (7 or more

Youths with an average grade of D or below were more than 4 times as likely to have used marijuana in the past year as youths who reported an average grade of A.⁷⁸

times weekly for an extended period) showed deficits in mathematical skills and verbal expression, as well as selective impairments in memory-retrieval processes.⁶ These findings clearly have significant implications for young people, since reductions in cognitive function can lead to poor performance in school.

Other impairments observed in frequent marijuana users involve sensory and time perception and coordinated movement, suggesting use of the drug can adversely affect driving and sports performance.⁷ Effects such as these may be especially problematic during teens' peak learning years, when their brains are still developing.

MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

Smoking marijuana leads to changes in the brain similar to those caused by cocaine, heroin, and alcohol.⁸ All of these drugs disrupt the flow of chemical neurotransmitters, and all have specific receptor sites in the brain that have been linked to feelings of pleasure and, over time, addiction. Cannabinoid receptors are affected by THC, the active ingredient in marijuana, and many of these sites are found in the parts of the brain that influence pleasure, memory, thought, concentration, sensory and time perception, and coordinated movement.⁹

Particularly for young people, marijuana use can lead to increased anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and other mental health problems. One study linked social withdrawal, anxiety, depression, attention problems, and thoughts of suicide in adolescents with past-year marijuana use.¹⁰ Other research shows that kids age 12 to 17 who smoke marijuana weekly are three times more likely than non-users to have thoughts about committing suicide.¹¹ A recently published longitudinal study showed that use of cannabis increased the risk of major depression fourfold, and researchers in Sweden found a link between marijuana use and an increased risk of developing schizophrenia.¹²

According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, addiction and psychiatric disorders often occur together. The latest National Survey on Drug Use and Health reported that adults who use illicit drugs were more than twice as likely to have serious mental illness as adults who did not use an illicit drug.¹³

Researchers conducting a longitudinal study of psychiatric disorders and substance use (including alcohol, marijuana, and other illicit drugs) have suggested several possible links between the two: 1) people may use drugs to feel better and alleviate symptoms of a mental disorder; 2) the use of the drug and the disorder share certain biological, social, or other risk factors; or 3) use of the drug can lead to anxiety, depression, or other disorders.¹⁴

TRAFFIC SAFETY

Marijuana also harms when it contributes to auto crashes or other incidents that injure or kill, a problem that is especially prevalent among young people. In a study reported by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, even a moderate dose of marijuana was shown to impair driving performance. The study measured reaction time and how often drivers checked the rear-view mirror, side streets, and the relative speed of other vehicles.¹⁵

Another study looked at data concerning shock-trauma patients who had been involved in traffic crashes. The researchers found that 15 percent of the trauma patients who were injured while driving a car or motorcycle had been smoking marijuana, and another 17 percent had both THC and alcohol in their blood.¹⁶ Statistics such as these are particularly troubling in light of recent survey results indicating that almost 36 million people age 12 or older drove under the influence of alcohol, marijuana, or another illicit drug in the past year.¹⁷

LONG-TERM CONSEQUENCES

The consequences of marijuana use can last long after the drug's effects have worn off. Studies show that early use of marijuana is strongly associated with later use of other illicit drugs and with a greater risk of illicit drug dependence or abuse.¹⁸ In fact, an analysis of data from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse showed that the age of initiation for marijuana use was the most important predictor of later need for drug treatment.¹⁹

Regular marijuana use has been shown to be associated with other long-term problems, including poor academic performance,²⁰ poor job performance and increased absences from work,²¹ cognitive deficits,²² and lung damage.²³ Marijuana use is also associated with a number of risky sexual behaviors, including having multiple sex partners,²⁴ initiating sex at an early age,²⁵ and failing to use condoms consistently.²⁶