

II. Myths and Misperceptions

Many of the things Americans “know” about marijuana are myths or misperceptions. People need to know the truth about this harmful drug.

M Y T H 1 *Marijuana is harmless.*

Marijuana is far from harmless; in fact, recent scientific findings about the drug are startling. Most of the drug treatment for young people in the United States is for marijuana alone. Marijuana emergency-room mentions have skyrocketed over the past decade, and the drug is associated with an increased risk of developing schizophrenia, even when personality traits and pre-existing conditions are taken into account.

FACTS:

Health Consequences

- Marijuana smoke contains 50 percent to 70 percent more carcinogenic hydrocarbons than does tobacco smoke.¹⁰ Using marijuana may promote cancer of the respiratory tract and disrupt the immune system.¹¹
- Marijuana smokers have a heightened risk of lung infection.¹²
- Long-term use of marijuana may increase the risk of chronic cough, bronchitis, and emphysema, as well as cancer of the head, neck, and lungs.¹³
- Mentions of marijuana use in emergency room visits have risen 176 percent since 1994, surpassing those of heroin.¹⁴
- In 2001, marijuana was a contributing factor in more than 110,000 emergency department visits in the United States.¹⁵
- Marijuana can cause the heart rate, normally 70 to 80 beats per minute, to increase by 20 to 50 beats per minute or, in some cases, even to double.¹⁷
- In a 2003 study, researchers in England found that smoking marijuana for even less than six years causes a marked deterioration in lung function. The study suggests that marijuana use may rob the body of antioxidants that protect cells against damage that can lead to heart disease and cancer.¹⁸
- Marijuana affects alertness, concentration, perception, coordination, and reaction time—skills that are necessary for safe driving. A roadside study of reckless drivers in Tennessee found that 33 percent of all subjects who were not under the influence of alcohol and who were tested for drugs at the scene of their arrest tested positive for marijuana.²⁰ In a 2003 Canadian study, one in five students admitted to driving within an hour of using marijuana.²¹

Smoking marijuana leads to changes in the brain similar to those caused by the use of cocaine and heroin.¹⁶

- Marijuana users have more suicidal thoughts and are four times more likely to report symptoms of depression than people who never used the drug.²²
- The *British Medical Journal* recently reported: "Cannabis use is associated with an increased risk of developing schizophrenia, consistent with a causal relation. This association is not explained by use of other psychoactive drugs or personality traits relating to social integration."²³

The British Lung Foundation reports that smoking three or four marijuana joints is as bad for your lungs as smoking 20 tobacco cigarettes.¹⁹

Social Consequences

- Heavy marijuana use impairs the ability of young people to concentrate and retain information during their peak learning years. Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the main active chemical in marijuana, changes the way sensory information gets into and is processed by the part of the brain that is crucial for learning and memory.²⁴
- Animal studies indicate that marijuana use may interfere with brain function and create problems with the perception of time, possibly making the user less adept at tasks that require sustained attention.²⁵
- Marijuana use has been associated with poor performance in school. One report showed that youths with an average grade of D or below were more than four times as likely to have used marijuana in the past year as youths with an average grade of A.²⁶
- Marijuana users in their later teen years are more likely to have an increased risk of delinquency and more friends who exhibit deviant behavior. They also tend to have more sexual partners and are more likely to engage in unsafe sex.²⁷

Economic Consequences

- Use of marijuana and other illicit drugs comes at significant expense to society in terms of lost employee productivity, public health care costs, and accidents.²⁸
- Americans spent \$10.6 billion on marijuana purchases in 1999.²⁹

M Y T H 2

Marijuana is not addictive.

Marijuana has been proven to be a psychologically addictive drug. Scientists at the National Institute on Drug Abuse have demonstrated that laboratory animals will self-administer THC in doses equivalent to those used by humans who smoke marijuana.³⁰

FACTS:

- Marijuana is much more powerful today than it was 30 years ago, and so are its mind-altering effects. Average THC levels rose from less than 1 percent in the mid-1970s to more than 6 percent in 2002. Sinsemilla potency increased in the past two decades from 6 percent to more than 13 percent, with some samples containing THC levels of up to 33 percent.³¹
- Subjects in an experiment on marijuana withdrawal experienced symptoms such as restlessness, loss of appetite, trouble with sleeping, weight loss, and shaky hands.³²
- According to one study, marijuana use by teenagers with prior serious antisocial problems can quickly lead to dependence on the drug. The study also found that, for troubled teenagers using tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana, progression from their first use of marijuana to regular use was about as rapid as their progression to regular tobacco use, and more rapid than the progression to regular use of alcohol.³³

Some heavy users of marijuana show signs of dependence, developing withdrawal symptoms when they have not used the drug for a period of time.

MYTH 3

Youth experimentation with marijuana is inevitable.

Drug use can be prevented. The majority of young people do not use drugs, and there are proven ways to keep kids from starting. Contrary to popular belief, marijuana use is not a rite of passage. It is a risky behavior with serious consequences. Every American has a role to play in the effort to reduce marijuana use—at home and on the job, in schools, places of worship, and civic or social organizations. Working together, we can reaffirm healthy attitudes about marijuana use.

FACTS:

- Surveys show that parents are the biggest influence in their children’s decisions about drug use.³⁴ Parents must actively engage in educating their children and help them make healthy decisions.
- We know that when we push back against the drug problem, it recedes. Marijuana use has been dramatically lower in the past—even in the last decade—and it can be reduced again.³⁵

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MYTH 4

Marijuana is not associated with violence, as are drugs like cocaine and heroin. The criminalization of marijuana is what leads to crime, not the drug itself.

It’s not simply the trafficking of drugs that causes crime at home and abroad. Crime also results from the behavior of people who have drug dependencies.

FACTS:

- Research shows a link between frequent marijuana use and increased violent behavior.³⁶
- Young people who use marijuana weekly are nearly four times more likely than nonusers to engage in violence.³⁷
- More than 41 percent of male arrestees in sampled U.S. cities tested positive for marijuana.³⁸

MYTH 5

Prisons are filled with non-violent, casual marijuana users.

Most law enforcement officials would attest that simple marijuana users rarely get sent to jail. In fact, a substantial number of states and localities rate simple possession of marijuana as a misdemeanor, subject only to a small fine. Our prisons are not filled with people whose only crime was smoking marijuana. The vast majority of those behind bars for marijuana offenses are mid- and large-scale traffickers and distributors.

FACTS:

- Less than one percent of all state prison inmates in 1997 were serving time just for marijuana possession (0.7 percent), and only 0.3 percent of marijuana-possession offenders were in prison on a first offense.³⁹
- On the federal level, nearly 98 percent of the 7,991 offenders sentenced for marijuana crimes in 2001 were guilty of trafficking. Only 2.3 percent—186 people—were sentenced for simple possession of marijuana.⁴⁰
- The median amount of marijuana involved in the conviction in federal court of marijuana-only possession offenders in 1997 was 115 pounds. In other words, half of all federal prisoners convicted just for marijuana possession were arrested with quantities exceeding 115 pounds.⁴¹

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