

MYTH 2

Marijuana is not addictive.

It was once believed that marijuana was not addictive; many people still believe this to be the case. But recent research shows that use of the drug can indeed lead to dependence. Some heavy users of marijuana develop withdrawal symptoms when they have not used the drug for a period of time.

Marijuana use, in fact, is often associated with behavior that meets the criteria for substance dependence established by the American Psychiatric Association in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV). Considered the standard reference for health professionals who make psychiatric diagnoses, the DSM contains information about all mental disorders for children and adults. As described in the DSM, the criteria for substance dependence include tolerance (needing more of the substance to achieve the same effects, or diminished effect with the same amount of the substance); withdrawal symptoms; using a drug even in the presence of adverse effects; and giving up social, occupational, or recreational activities because of substance use.²⁷ According to the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 4.3 million Americans were classified with dependence on or abuse of marijuana. That figure represents 1.8 percent of the total U.S. population and 60.3 percent of those classified as individuals who abuse or are dependent on illicit drugs.²⁸

The desire for marijuana exerts a powerful pull on those who use it, and this desire, coupled with withdrawal symptoms, can make it hard for long-term smokers to stop using the drug. Users trying to quit often report irritability, anxiety, and difficulty sleeping.²⁹ On psychological tests they also display increased aggression, which peaks approximately one week after they last used the drug.³⁰

Many people use marijuana compulsively even though it interferes with family, school, work, and recreational activities. What makes this all the more disturbing is that marijuana use has been shown to be

three times more likely to lead to dependence among adolescents than among adults.³¹ Research indicates that the earlier kids start using marijuana, the more likely they are to become dependent on this or other illicit drugs later in life.³²

TREATMENT ADMISSIONS

More teens enter treatment each year with a primary diagnosis of marijuana dependence than for all other illicit drugs combined.³³ Currently, 62 percent of teens in drug treatment are dependent on marijuana.³⁴

The proportion of admissions for primary marijuana abuse increased from 6 percent in 1992 to 15 percent of admissions to treatment in 2000.³⁵ Almost half (47 percent) of the people admitted

for marijuana were under 20 years old, and many of them started smoking pot at a very early age. Of those admitted for treatment for primary marijuana dependence, 56 percent had first used the drug by age 14, and 26 percent had begun by age 12.³⁶

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