

# MARIJUANA

A serious  
health concern for **YOU**  
and **YOUR** family

County of San Diego Health and Human Services



Alcohol and Drug Services, ADS



## A serious health concern for YOU and YOUR family

Marijuana can be harmful in a number of ways. Yet, nearly 98 million Americans over the age of 12 have tried marijuana at least once in their life. Just because it's common, doesn't make it a smart choice. It's always a good idea to know the facts.

In addition to the many negative health affects, Marijuana impairs memory, judgment, and perception. Altered decision-making abilities may lead users to legal problems or risky sexual behavior, including unplanned pregnancies and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV.

### What is it?

Marijuana is a green, brown, or gray mixture of dried, shredded leaves, stems, seeds, and flowers of the hemp plant. There are many different names for marijuana and they vary from one part of the country to another. Marijuana contains THC (delta-9- tetrahydrocanna binol), and more than 400 other chemicals. Most often, it is smoked like a cigarette ("joint"), but it can also be mixed in with food, or consumed utilized in other forms.

### Is it addictive?

Some people can become highly addicted to the drug. They cannot control their urges to seek out and use marijuana, even though it negatively affects their life. According to one study, marijuana use by teenagers who have prior antisocial problems can quickly lead to addiction. Marijuana addicts crave the drug and experience withdrawal symptoms when they stop using it. These symptoms include depression, restlessness, loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, weight loss, nausea and shaky hands. Babies born to women using marijuana may have withdrawal symptoms.

### The physical effects of marijuana include:

- Tremors (shaking)
- Nausea
- Headache
- Decreased coordination
- Breathing problems and lung damage
- Increased appetite
- Reduced blood flow to the brain
- Increased heart rate
- Risk of heart attack
- Loss of brain cells
- Changes in the reproductive organs
- Reduced fertility
- Harmful pregnancy
- Cancer

Plus, all forms of marijuana are mind-altering and change how the brain works. Results may include:

- Reduced short-term memory
- Reduced alertness and concentration
- Anxiety, paranoia
- Impaired judgment and decision making

### What are some of the health and behavior concerns?

Many studies show serious health concerns. One study explains that an abuser's risk of suffering a heart attack more than quadruples in the first hour after smoking marijuana. Marijuana effects blood pressure and heart rate and reduced oxygen-carrying capacity of blood. Even infrequent use can cause burning and stinging of the mouth and throat, often accompanied by a heavy cough.

As people age, they normally lose nerve cells in a region of the brain that is important for remembering events and where memories are formed. Chronic exposure to marijuana may cause this to happen even more quickly. Marijuana also affects short-term memory and may make it difficult to complete even simple tasks.

Long-term marijuana use may lead to lack of motivation, not caring about what happens in one's life, no desire to work regularly, fatigue, and a lack of concern for one's appearance. Students who use marijuana may find it hard to study and learn. It may also impact athletic performance since marijuana affects all timing, movements, and coordination. Because of the drug's effects on alertness, concentration, coordination, perceptions and reaction time, marijuana users could be involved in car accidents.

### Smoking marijuana may be more harmful to the lungs than smoking tobacco.

A group of scientists in California examined the health status of 450 daily marijuana smokers who did not consume tobacco. They found that the marijuana smokers had more sick days and more doctor visits for respiratory problems and other types of illness than a similar group who only smoked tobacco. Other studies have shown that tobacco smoke and marijuana smoke may work together to change the tissues lining the respiratory tract. People who





smoke marijuana regularly may develop many of the same breathing problems that tobacco smokers have, such as daily cough and phlegm production, more frequent chest colds, a heightened risk of lung infections, and a greater tendency toward obstructed airways.

Like tobacco, marijuana contains many chemicals that can hurt the lungs and cause cancer. In fact, marijuana smoke contains 50 to 70 percent more carcinogenic hydrocarbons than tobacco smoke. It may also accelerate the changes that ultimately produce malignant cells. Marijuana smoking doubled or tripled the risk of developing cancer of the head or neck and also has the potential to promote cancer of the lungs and other parts of the respiratory tract because it contains irritants and carcinogens sometimes in higher concentrations.

Studies show that five joints per day may be taking in as many cancer-causing chemicals as a full pack of cigarettes every day. One marijuana cigarette can cause more damage to the lungs than many tobacco cigarettes because marijuana has more tar and is usually smoked without filters. Marijuana users also usually inhale more deeply and hold their breath longer than tobacco smokers, which increases the lungs' exposure to cancer-causing smoke.

**Marijuana babies – the innocent victims.**

Marijuana use can reduce fertility in both men and women, making it difficult to conceive. It may harm the growth of the baby during pregnancy, and increase the risk of premature

delivery. After birth, some babies may have withdrawal-like symptoms. And according to some studies, children have shown increased behavioral problems during infancy and preschool years. In school, these children are more likely to have problems with decision-making, memory, and completely lose their ability to remain attentive.

**How can marijuana affect your mental health?**

First of all, some people use marijuana as a way to escape a difficulty or challenge with their daily life, and avoid dealing with important issues. Unfortunately, problems usually get worse rather than go away, and the person is left to deal with a worse situation and turn to more powerful means of escape. Additionally, some users can suffer bad reactions from abusing marijuana. They may experience sudden feelings of anxiety and have paranoid thoughts. Some studies show that when people have smoked large amounts of marijuana for years, the drug takes its toll on mental functions. Marijuana affects the parts of the brain that control memory, attention, and learning.

Some evidence also indicates increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thinking in chronic marijuana users.

**Watch for warning signs in teens and younger children.**

Research shows that appropriate parental monitoring may reduce possible drug use. Parents should be aware of changes in their child's

behavior, although this may be difficult with teens.

Parents should look for withdrawal from regular activities, depression, fatigue, carelessness with grooming, hostility, and deteriorating relationships with family members and friends.

In addition, changes in academic performance, skipping school, lost interest in sports or other favorite activities, and changes in eating or sleeping habits could be related to drug use.

Marijuana can pose a particular threat to the health and well being of children and adolescents at a critical point in their lives—when they are growing, learning, maturing, and laying the foundation for their adult years. Young people who have already begun to smoke cigarettes and/or use alcohol are at a higher risk for marijuana use.

All aspects of a child's environment—home, school, and neighborhood—help determine whether a child will try drugs. Curiosity and the desire to fit into a social group are common reasons. Research suggests that family members are strong role models in whether children start using drugs. Children tend to copy parents, grandparents, and older brothers and sisters living in the same home. Some

**Why kids might try marijuana or other drugs**

- Use by role models – family, friends, celebrities
- Curiosity
- Wanting to fit in
- Difficulty coping – anxiety, anger, depression, boredom
- Avoid dealing with problems
- Rebellion





have a network of friends who use drugs and urge them to do the same (peer pressure). Others may think it's cool to use marijuana because they hear songs about it and see it on TV and in movies.

Some children mention psychological coping as a reason for their use—to deal with anxiety, anger, depression, boredom, and so forth. But marijuana use is not an effective method for coping with life's problems, and being "high" under the influence of marijuana can be a way of avoiding the problems and challenges of growing up.

Researchers have found that children and teens (both male and female), who are physically and/or sexually abused are at greater risk for using marijuana and other drugs at an early age.

Adolescents who may be prone to marijuana use include those who are rebellious, cannot control their emotions, and experience internal distress.

### Addictions can harm the user and their family

A drug or alcohol addiction has a serious effect on the people around the user, especially their loved ones. Substance abuse most visibly hurts the physical and emotional wellbeing of the user, but it also affects those around him or her.

The most common feelings that family members may experience include guilt - sometimes blaming themselves for the user's dependency on drugs - disappointment, shame, and fear of the user actions.



### How can you prevent your child from getting involved with marijuana?

Communication is key. Even if teenagers won't admit it, parents play a powerful role. Parents can be influential by talking to their children about the dangers of using marijuana and other drugs, by remaining actively engaged in their children's lives, and by staying involved in their schoolwork, recreation, and social activities with their children's friends.

Parents need to recognize that marijuana use is a serious concern, and they need to tell their children not to use it. Although it is best to talk about drugs when children are young, it is never too late to talk about the dangers of drug use. Talking to your children about drug abuse is not always easy, but it is very important. Children look to their parents and other family members for help and guidance in working out problems and making decisions, including the decision not to use drugs.

### Help is available.

There are many resources where parents can get information on drugs to share with their children.

If your teen already has a problem, reach out and get help from friends, family and treatment support in your community.

The County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency funds a variety of free and low-cost services for teens and their families.

For more information on these services, call the multi-lingual **Access and Crisis Line at 1-800-477-3339.**

Trained counselors are available to assist 24 hours per day, 7 days per week.

*The information in this publication was summarized in easy-to-read format for community education and awareness about the risk of using marijuana. This document is in the public domain and can be freely downloaded and reproduced without permission from County of San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services, ADS and Salud+Health Info publications. However, you should properly include the acknowledgement of County of San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services, ADS as the source of the information.*

*County of San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services, ADS provides an integrated system of community-based alcohol and other drug prevention, intervention, treatment, and recovery services throughout San Diego County via contracts with local service providers.*

#### SOURCES:

- *Marijuana: Facts parents Need to Know. Publications from The National Clearinghouse on Alcohol and Drug Information National Institute on Drug Abuse website: <http://www.nida.nih.gov/MarijBroch/parentpg21-22N.html>*

*And information from NIDA's Web sites:  
\* [www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)  
\* [www.marijuana-info.org](http://www.marijuana-info.org)  
\* [www.teens.drugabuse.gov](http://www.teens.drugabuse.gov)*

- *National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information website: <http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/>*

- *Revolution Health Addiction Community website: <http://www.revolutionhealth.com/forums/addiction>*

- *Marijuana's Adverse Effects. By the American Academy of Family Physicians. website: <http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/common/addictions/drugs/485.html>*

- *March of Dimes. website: [http://www.marchofdimes.com/pnhec/159\\_4427.asp](http://www.marchofdimes.com/pnhec/159_4427.asp).*

- *10 Questions Adolescents Have About Marijuana Addiction researchers answer teens' questions about pot website: <http://health.usnews.com/articles/health/2008/04/25/10-questions-adolescents-have-about-marijuana.html?PageNr=2>*

- *Addiction: Harm to the User and Family. website: <http://www.junkieslife.com/?p=181>*