

MARIJUANA

WHAT IS MARIJUANA?

Marijuana is a mind-altering drug that produces a variety of reactions – primarily the distortion of perceptions. The drug (also called pot, grass, smoke, reefer, ganja, and weed) comes from the plant *Cannabis Sativa*, which contains more than 400 different chemical substances – at least 60 of which are unique to cannabis and known as cannabinoids. The particular cannabinoid primarily responsible for marijuana’s mind-altering capability is delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol or THC.

Hashish and hash oil are also made from the cannabis plant. These more concentrated forms of marijuana contain proportionately more THC. While marijuana is usually smoked in cigarettes made from the dried plant material, hashish is most often smoked in pipes – many of which cool the smoke by passing it through water. Hash oil, a crude extract of hashish, can be smoked in a glass pipe or applied to a tobacco cigarette.

HOW HAS MARIJUANA CHANGED RECENTLY?

Just fifteen years ago, the marijuana available to most users contained less than one half of one percent THC, but the marijuana available today is from 10 to 15 times as strong and certain varieties (known as “Sinsemilla”) contain as much as seven percent THC. Hash oil can be bought in concentrations as great as 60 percent THC.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF MARIJUANA?

Shortly after smoking marijuana, the user feels intoxicated. Perceptions are altered (particularly sense of time and distance). Memory of recent events is impaired, and physical coordination is affected.

Although the phase of acute intoxication may end after 2 or 3 hours, measurable impairment of mental and physical ability persists much longer. Persons driving under the influence of marijuana have become a major hazard on our highways – in part because they underestimate the degree and persistence of these effects – and surveys indicate as many as 80 percent of marijuana users sometimes drive while high.

WHY DO PEOPLE USE MARIJUANA?

Marijuana is often first used to satisfy curiosity or in response to social pressure. Many who try the drug find its mind-altering effects can temporarily relieve tension, boredom, frustration or depression. Using the drug to control these feelings, however, may lead to dependency ~ for few habitual users can stop smoking marijuana without experiencing some anxiety or depression.

CAN MARIJUANA HARM THE USER?

Yes. Marijuana can harm the user in many ways.

- 1) Heavy pot smokers may seriously damage their lungs, much like heavy cigarette smokers do. Because marijuana smokers inhale a hot, unfiltered gas containing powerful irritants—and draw the smoke deep into their lungs—the damage may well occur in a relatively short time. In addition, marijuana smoke contains many of the cancer causing agents found in cigarette smoke—some in much larger amounts.
- 2) THC affects the hormones which regulate the female reproductive system. Scientists are concerned this may have lasting effects on the teenage female’s reproductive system. Studies strongly suggest marijuana can also have adverse effects on the developing fetus.
- 3) Marijuana use lowers the sperm count in males. It decreases the mobility of sperm and causes a significant increase in the formation of abnormal sperm cells.
- 4) Studies have also shown marijuana causes the heart to beat faster and work harder.

- 5) Several studies suggest the use of marijuana may impair resistance to disease by suppressing the user's immune system. While more research is needed, it should be noted that the combination of inhaled carcinogens (cancer-causing agents) and depression of the immune response would result in greater risk of cancer.
- 6) Because THC is a fat soluble drug, it tends to be stored in the fatty tissues of the body. Regular marijuana users never completely rid themselves of THC. It builds up in the brain and in other organs. It takes at least a week for the body to eliminate all of the THC taken in after smoking just one "joint".

ARE THERE ACUTE REACTIONS TO MARIJUANA?

Yes. The most common acute effect is a state of severe anxiety known as "panic reaction". Emergency rooms admit many thousands of victims each year suffering from acute panic induced by marijuana. Although most cases respond favorably to simple reassurance and disappear in a few hours as the drug effects wear off, many require professional help. In addition, the use of marijuana can bring emotional problems to the surface and trigger such severe psychological disorders as schizophrenia. Regular users who smoke marijuana to relieve depression frequently cause the problem to become worse. An estimated 5,000 individuals seek professional treatment every month for problems related to marijuana use.

DOES MARIJUANA POSE ANY PARTICULAR HAZARD TO YOUNG PEOPLE?

Yes. Marijuana use interferes with the normal process of growing up. Young people who use marijuana or other drugs to cope with the pressures of adolescence never learn how to address problems in the mature, independent and responsible manner necessary to become healthy adults.

Clinicians have also reported an "amotivational syndrome" characterized by apathy, indifference, and a narrowing of interests in young marijuana users. It is not clear whether marijuana is the direct cause of these problems, but clinicians have noted these symptoms in large numbers of marijuana-using adolescents. In addition, the sedative properties of marijuana are well known, and it is not surprising that a decrease in motivation should occur with its chronic use.

DOES MARIJUANA USE LEAD TO THE USE OF OTHER DRUGS?

While the use of other drugs is not inevitable, it is consistent with the attitudes and values of regular marijuana users. For someone who believes it is acceptable to escape from pressures or boredom through use of marijuana, it is a simple matter to try another chemical "solution". When an individual becomes part of a drug-using crowd, he/she is exposed to a variety of different drugs – each of them stronger and "better" than the one before. The big decision has already been made; it is now okay to get high – to escape. Once a person gives himself/herself permission to use any drug, it is so much easier to use drugs the next time and the time after that.

DOES MARIJUANA HAVE ANY LEGITIMATE MEDICAL USES?

Not at present, although scientists are studying the therapeutic application of some of the chemical components in marijuana (including THC). No reliable scientific organizations or agencies recommend smoking any drug as an effective delivery mechanism for that medication.

The possible applications of marijuana as a medicine should not be confused with the issue of "recreational" use. Many other dangerous drugs, including cocaine and morphine, have legitimate medical uses—but they are strictly controlled because of their potential for abuse. Should marijuana components be found to have any legitimate therapeutic uses, they, too, will be strictly controlled to prevent abuse.