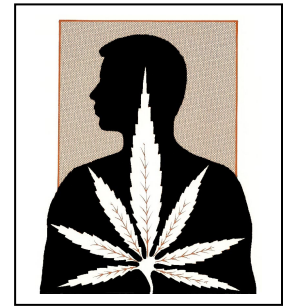


The Health Effects of Marijuana



Negative Health Effects Are Numerous

By Buddy T, About.com

Although drug legalization activists and many marijuana users believe smoking pot has no negative effects, scientific research indicates that marijuana use can cause many different health problems.

Marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug in the United States. When smoked, it begins to affect users almost immediately, and its effects can last for one to three hours. When it is eaten in food, such as baked in brownies and cookies, the effects take longer to begin, but usually last longer.

Short-Term Effects

The short-term effects of marijuana include:

- Distorted perception (sights, sounds, time, touch)
- Problems with memory and learning
- Loss of coordination
- Trouble with thinking and problem-solving
- Increased heart rate, altered blood pressure

Sometimes marijuana use can also produce anxiety, fear, distrust, or panic.

Effects on the Brain

The active ingredient in marijuana, delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol or THC, acts on cannabinoid receptors on nerve cells and influences the activity of those cells. Some brain areas have many cannabinoid receptors, but other areas of the brain have few or none at all. Many cannabinoid receptors are found in the parts of the brain that influence pleasure, memory, thought, concentration, sensory and time perception, and coordinated movement.

When high doses of marijuana are ingested, users can experience the following symptoms:

- Hallucinations
- Delusions
- Impaired memory
- Disorientation

Recent studies indicate that weekly or more frequent use of marijuana can double a teen's risk of depression. Teenagers aged 12 to 17 who smoke marijuana weekly are three times more likely to have thoughts of committing suicide. Marijuana use increases the risk of developing schizophrenia among people with no prior history of a disorder. Heavy users of marijuana at age 18 increase their risk of schizophrenia later in life by six times.

Effects on the Heart

Within a few minutes after smoking marijuana, the heart begins beating more rapidly and the blood pressure drops. Marijuana can cause the heart beat to increase by 20 to 50 beats per minute, and can increase even more if other drugs are used at the same time.

Because of the lower blood pressure and higher heart rate, researchers found that users' risk for a heart attack is four times higher within the first hour after smoking marijuana.

Effects on the Lungs

Smoking marijuana, even infrequently, can cause burning and stinging of the mouth and throat, and cause heavy coughing. Scientists have found that regular marijuana smokers can experience the same respiratory problems as tobacco smokers do, including:

- Daily cough and phlegm production
- More frequent acute chest illnesses
- Increased risk of lung infections
- Obstructed airways

Marijuana contains more carcinogenic hydrocarbons than tobacco smoke, and because marijuana smokers usually inhale deeper and hold the smoke in their lungs longer than tobacco smokers, their lungs are exposed to those carcinogenic properties longer.

One study found that marijuana smokers were three times more likely to develop cancer of the head or neck than non-smokers. Many researchers believe that smoking marijuana is overall more harmful to the lungs than smoking tobacco.

Other Health Effects

Research indicates that THC impairs the body's immune system from fighting disease, which can cause a wide variety of health problems. One study found that marijuana actually inhibited the disease-preventing actions of key immune cells. Another study found that THC increased the risk of developing bacterial infections and tumors.

Effects of Exposure During Pregnancy

Several studies have found that children born to mothers who used marijuana during pregnancy exhibit some problems with neurological development. According to those studies, prenatal marijuana exposure can cause:

- Altered responses to visual stimuli
- Increased tremulousness
- Problems with sustained attention and memory
- Poor problem-solving skills

Sources:

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