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MARIJUANA – Facts to Consider

Marijuana, also known by street names as “pot, bud, weed, grass, dope,” and other terms, is one of the three most commonly abused drugs (the other two are tobacco and alcohol). The potential negative consequences of use are often dismissed: “It’s only marijuana, not hard drugs!” The distinction people tend to draw between “hard” drugs and others is based on beliefs about the addictive potential of the drug, the physical effects, and consequences of use. It is easy to recognize that when one is “shooting-up” drugs, there is a real problem, and it is easy to dismiss the student who is “just” lighting up a joint.

Why do people consider marijuana to be a benign drug?

In the 1960’s, when the popularity of marijuana use surged, the potency of THC was quite low. Although there were myths and warnings about the dangers of marijuana, few health hazards were noted. The myths about marijuana, such as the notion that smoking one joint would cause addiction, or that marijuana use would automatically lead to use of drugs like heroin, had no basis, in fact, and were meant to discourage use through creation of fear. The main effect of these warnings and myths, however, was to destroy the credibility of anti-drug spokespeople, and to create the belief that the dangers of all drugs were exaggerated. Unfortunately, we are still dealing with the residue of those attitudes today.

So what do we really know about marijuana? Is it a benign drug as many would like to believe? If it is dangerous, why is it legally used in some places for medicinal purposes?

What are the immediate, short-term effects of marijuana?

As with other drugs, the effects of marijuana are dependent upon individual factors, potency or amount used, setting, and mood of the user. Marijuana can act as a stimulant or depressant, but most commonly, it produces sensations of physical relaxation. Other physical effects include increased heart rate, decreased blood pressure, increased appetite, and decreased nausea (the reason it is used medically to combat the side-effects of chemotherapy or the debilitating effects of AIDS), and decreased pressure behind the eyes (hence its effectiveness against glaucoma).

What are the long-term effects of marijuana?

THC is fat soluble and it accumulates in the fatty lining of cells in the body, particularly in the brain and reproductive organs, and it is slowly metabolized by the body. A week after smoking marijuana, 30-50% of the THC is still present in the body; traces can be detected for 30 days or more. Therefore, even those who use “only on weekends” are never free of the drug.

The accumulation of THC has negative effects on the brain, the respiratory system, and the reproductive system. Marijuana affects the part of the brain that regulates hormones. In females, interference with hormonal signals can cause irregular menstrual cycles, and an increase in testosterone levels.

In males, testosterone levels are depressed. Testosterone in males is necessary for the growth processes, including the broadening of shoulders, enlargement of muscles, beard growth, genital development, and deepening of the voice. Because adolescents are going through puberty, some of the effects on growth and development of reproductive systems can be permanent.

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What are the effects of marijuana use on learning?

Amotivational syndrome is also associated with marijuana use. This relates to the tendency for users to gradually give up all activities that do not involve or that interfere with drug use. The user becomes apathetic, lethargic, or withdrawn. Tendencies toward paranoia may also be present, with the user constantly complaining of being blamed or hassled.

Marijuana use affects short-term memory, but not long-term. Therefore, a student using marijuana may have difficulty “cramming” or retaining facts for an exam, but may do quite well with material that has been processed into long-term memory. For this reason, some students can use for a long time without the effects becoming apparent in their school work. All students who are “stoned” in school will have some measure of difficulty processing, and retaining information presented in class. Missed academic learning will, therefore, be a problem for students when they become sober.

What are the effects of marijuana use on emotional maturation?

Drug users avoid pain, boredom, or other problems by taking a short-cut to pleasurable physical sensations. If there is continued use of drugs as a means of problem solving, the individual doesn't learn how to resolve difficulties or to receive pleasure and satisfaction naturally. Young people who are always “stoned” at parties don't learn social skills, how to communicate, or to have fun without drugs. The cycle of chemical dependency is reinforced each time drugs are used as an escape, and the users emotional growth is stunted.

Is marijuana addictive?

Yes. Similarities between the effects of marijuana on the brain and those produced by cocaine, heroin, alcohol, and nicotine have been documented. THC triggers the release of the chemical dopamine into the reward pathways of the brain. Tolerance develops with heavy use of marijuana. Tolerance is another aspect of addiction, using more and more of a substance to achieve the same results as in early use. Marijuana withdrawal causes release of the same brain chemical linked to opiate, cocaine, and alcohol withdrawal.

Source: National Clearinghouse for Alcohol & Drug Information (NCADI)

Reviewed 1/07