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## **MARIJUANA MYTHS**

**What is Marijuana?** Marijuana is the most commonly used illicit drug in the United States. A dry, shredded green/brown mix of flowers, stems, seeds, and leaves of the hemp plant *Cannabis Sativa*, it usually is smoked as a cigarette (joint, nail), or in a pipe (bong). It also is smoked in blunts, which are cigars that have been emptied of tobacco and refilled with marijuana, often in combination with another drug. Use also might include mixing marijuana in food or brewing it as a tea. As a more concentrated, resinous form it is called hashish and, as a sticky black liquid, hash oil. Marijuana smoke has a pungent and distinctive, usually sweet-and-sour odor. There are countless street terms for marijuana including:

Pot, herb, weed, grass, widow, ganja, and hash, as well as terms derived from trademarked varieties of cannabis, such as Northern Lights®, Fruity Juice®, Afghani #1®, and a number of Skunk varieties.<sup>1</sup>

### **Myths Concerning Marijuana**

#### **Myth 1: Marijuana is harmless – it's just a plant.**

- **The brain.** Smoking marijuana leads to some changes in the brain similar to those caused by cocaine, heroin, and alcohol.<sup>2</sup> The main active chemical in marijuana is THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol). The membranes of certain nerve cells in the brain contain protein receptors that bind to THC. Once securely in place, THC kicks off a series of cellular reactions that ultimately lead to the high that users experience when they smoke marijuana.
- **Lung damage.** Marijuana use also has the potential to promote cancer of the lungs and other parts of the respiratory tract because it contains irritants and carcinogens. In fact, smoking marijuana can injure or destroy lung tissue. Regular marijuana users often develop breathing problems including chronic coughing and wheezing. Marijuana contains the same cancer-causing chemicals as tobacco. Marijuana smoke contains 50 – 70% more carcinogenic hydrocarbons than does tobacco smoke. It also produces high levels of an enzyme that converts certain hydrocarbons into their carcinogenic form – levels that may accelerate the changes that ultimately produce malignant cells. Marijuana users usually inhale more deeply and hold their breath longer than tobacco smokers do, which increases the lungs' exposure to carcinogenic smoke.<sup>2</sup>
- **Mental health.** For young users, marijuana can lead to increased anxiety, panic attacks, depression and other mental health problems. For those already prone to depression or anxiety attacks, marijuana use may accelerate or exacerbate problems.<sup>2</sup>
- **Effects on pregnancy.** Research has shown that babies born to women who used marijuana during their pregnancies display altered responses to visual stimuli, increased tremors, and a high-pitched cry, which may indicate neurological problems in development. During infancy and preschool years, marijuana-exposed children have been observed to have more behavioral problems than unexposed children and poorer performance on tasks of visual perception, language comprehension, sustained attention, and memory. In school, these children are more likely to exhibit deficits in decision-making skills, memory, and the ability to remain attentive.<sup>1</sup>

**Myth 2: You can't get addicted to marijuana.**

- Research has now established that marijuana is addictive. Each year more teens enter treatment with a primary diagnosis of marijuana dependence than for all other illicit drugs combined.<sup>4</sup>
- Research indicates that the earlier YOUTH start using marijuana, the more likely they are to become dependent on this or other illicit drugs later in life.<sup>2</sup>
- Research also shows that marijuana use is three times more likely to lead to dependence among adolescents than among adults.<sup>5</sup>

**Myth 3: Marijuana doesn't make you lose control. It just makes you mellow.**

- Marijuana affects learning and academic achievement. Researchers have found that heavy marijuana use impairs the ability of young people to concentrate and retain information. Regular marijuana use has been shown to be associated with cognitive deficits and poor academic performance. This may be especially problematic during teens' peak learning years, when their brains are still developing.<sup>2</sup>
- Marijuana is linked to risky behaviors. Despite popular notions, research has shown a link between frequent marijuana use and increased violent behavior. Research found that among youth, the incidence of physically attacking people, destroying property and stealing increased in proportion to the number of days marijuana was smoked in the past year.<sup>2</sup>
- Marijuana impairs driving. Marijuana affects alertness, concentration, perception, coordination and reaction time, many of the skills required for safe driving and other tasks. These effects can last several hours after smoking marijuana. Marijuana use can also make it difficult to judge distances and react to signals and sounds on the road.<sup>2</sup>

1 NIDA Infofacts, April 12, 2005. [www.drugabuse.gov/Infofacts/marijuana](http://www.drugabuse.gov/Infofacts/marijuana)

2 Marijuana Prevention Initiative – Media Campaign, August 24, 2003. [www.mediacampaign.org/marijuana](http://www.mediacampaign.org/marijuana)

3 American Lung Association, from choices, your anti-drug ad. [www.freevibe.com](http://www.freevibe.com)

4 Treatment Episodes Data Set 2000, National Admissions to Substance Abuse Treatment Services. SAMHSA

5 Youth Marijuana Prevention Initiative, 10/02, the NCADI Report, U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services