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It Takes a Village

By [Judy Shepps Battle](#) | [Email the author](#) | July 13, 2011

Opinion

Teen Marijuana Use is on the Rise

It is not surprising that marijuana use is on the rise for teens and that they question the harmfulness of periodically smoking a joint.

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Marijuana is one of the most commonly used illicit drugs in America and a prime candidate for legalization in the not-so-distant future.

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Given these twin facts, it is not surprising that marijuana use is on the rise for teens and that they question the harmfulness of periodically smoking a joint. *After all, they argue, it isn't like heroin or cocaine, where taking it once might kill me.*

It is also understandable that many adults -- especially those who experimented with marijuana in their youth -- feel uncomfortable discussing this drug with their child.

My hope is that parents will use the information below to talk with their teen about abstinence and/or harm reduction if drug use has already begun (e.g., not driving and/or engaging in risky sexual behavior while under the influence).

Have the conversation, it may be life-altering.



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What Is Marijuana?

Marijuana is a dry, shredded, brown and green mix of seeds, leaves, stems, and flowers derived from the hemp plant *Cannabis sativa* that contains THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol), a powerful psychoactive or mind-altering chemical.

The plant itself is easy to grow and relatively inexpensive to purchase.

According to the Controlled Substances Act of 1970, marijuana is a Schedule 1 drug. This means it is illegal to buy, possess, manufacture, process, or distribute without a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) license. Distributors and users both can be sentenced to jail time.

Street names for marijuana include pot, weed, Mary Jane, reefer, ganja, gangster, boom, and grass.

How It Works

Marijuana can be smoked in many ways. It can be rolled in the form of a cigarette (joint), mixed with tobacco and put it inside a hollowed-out cigar (blunt), or used in a pipe (bong).

The drug can also be brewed as a tea and/or cooked inside food. Perhaps the most well-known culinary product is "Alice B. Toklas brownies." Made famous in the 1960s, these are ordinary brownies with chopped up marijuana added to the batter before cooking.

Why is marijuana pleasurable?

The simple answer is that regardless of how it is ingested, the drug increases the supply of dopamine -- a "feel good" chemical -- in the user's brain, creating euphoria or a "high." The following effects appear within a few minutes of inhaling, peak after about 10 to 30 minutes, and wear off within two to three hours.

- Extreme relaxation
- Laughter or giggling

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- Heightened sensory perception, such as seeing brighter colors
- An altered sense of time, such as minutes feeling like hours

However, this enjoyment carries with it some risk, as seen below in the section on negative consequences.

Who Is Using Marijuana?

The NIDA-funded 2010 Monitoring the Future Study (MTF) indicates that marijuana use has become increasingly popular for students in the 8th, 10th, and 12th grades, while their perceived health risk of using this drug continues to decline.

Most dramatic is the rise in reported daily marijuana use for all three grades.

Current reported daily use rates are 6.1 percent of 12th graders, 3.3 percent of 10th graders, and 1.2 percent of 8th graders compared to 2009 rates of 5.2 percent, 2.8 percent, and 1.0 percent, respectively.

For high school seniors -- many of whom are new drivers -- this reflects a daily or near-daily marijuana use by nearly one in sixteen students.

Equally powerful is the decline in student belief that using this drug is risky.

This perception decreased nearly 6 percent for 12th graders (from 52.4 percent in 2009 to 46.8 percent in 2010) and more than 2 percent for 10th graders (from 59.5 percent in 2009 to 57.2 percent in 2010).

There is no reason to believe these statistics are any different for local middle and high school students.

Clearly, both school and community prevention efforts are not enough. It is critical that parents educate themselves and their teens about the nature and potential consequences of marijuana use on developing minds and bodies.

Negative Consequences: Immediate and Longer-term

Potentially harmful consequences of marijuana begin almost immediately after the first inhale, or toke. Within minutes, heart rate increases, bronchial passages relax and become enlarged, and eye blood vessels expand creating the red eyes associated with using the drug.

Heart rate may increase by 20 to 50 beats per minute over the usual rate of 70 to 80 beats or may even double. Evidence suggests that heart attack risk during the first hour after smoking marijuana is as much as four times the person's usual risk.**

In addition, THC negatively impacts parts of the brain that regulate balance, posture, coordination, and reaction time, causing immediate impairment in:

- Coordination and balance
- Short-term memory
- Ability to focus or pay attention
- Judgment

These adverse responses are likely to end as soon as the drug wears off.

There are, however, potential long-term effects of chronic marijuana use. Researchers agree that:

- Daily or near-daily use of marijuana has the potential to create impairment in memory, learning skills, sleep patterns, and school performance
- As many as one in six individuals who start using marijuana as teens become addicted to it
- For youth with a family history of psychosis or schizophrenia, the risk of developing such psychoses in adulthood is significantly increased for those smoking marijuana five or more times a week.***

Finally, the purity of street-purchased marijuana cannot be ascertained by visual inspection. The possibility that it has been laced with another, more dangerous substance such as cocaine, crack, PCP, or even embalming fluid exists with each buy.

Having the Conversation

Signs that your teen may be using marijuana include:

- Very red, bloodshot eyes
- Seeming giggly and silly for no reason
- Being dizzy and having trouble walking
- Having a hard time remembering events that just happened
- Increased appetite (otherwise known as "the munchies")
- Slowed reaction time****

As always, the keys to having a productive conversation are respectful listening and making it clear that health and safety are your prime concerns. Don't be afraid to discuss the harm reduction strategies mentioned earlier. It is better that your child has a plan for action (or inaction) before his or

her inhibitions are reduced by the drug.

If you can, make a contract with your teen that he will not engage in risky behaviors and will call you if she cannot handle the situation or need a ride home.

Finally, use the services of a counselor trained in this area if you still have questions. Trust that every effort you make will pay lifelong dividends to your child.

* See <http://medicalmarijuana.procon.org/view.resource.php?resourceID=000881>

** See <http://www.nida.nih.gov/researchreports/marijuana/marijuana3.html>

*** See <http://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/teens-who-smoke-pot-at-risk-for-later-schizophrenia-psychosis-201103071676>

**** For additional information in this area see <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/drug-addiction/DS00183/DSECTION=symptoms>

REFERENCES:

NIDA (National Institute on Drug Abuse) - <http://www.nida.nih.gov/newsroom/10/NR12-14.html>

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