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Is marijuana medicine or an easy high?

Marijuana is the most commonly-used illegal drug in the U.S. Currently, in 15 states and Washington DC it is legal, but only if your doctor says you need it. So, is it a prescription for real medicine or a prescription for addiction?

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Curt Knudson takes his daily medication by inhaling it.

And this is what Curt is inhaling, medicinal marijuana. He takes it daily to help improve his appetite. Since he was diagnosed with HIV and Hepatitis, keeping weight on has been a challenge.

Curt said, "With the use of marijuana, I have interest in food. It helps just with a better quality of life."

Curt is able to purchase everything from plain marijuana to pot butter with a prescription from his doctor. It is legal in his state and 15 others.

Shaun Gindi runs a marijuana dispensary. He says many of his clients are in desperate need of pain relief.

Shaun said, "I've had people cry on my shoulders because they've been on morphine for 20 years."

According to the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, a recent study offered insights on how medicinal marijuana works in the body. Researchers found a special molecule in pot activates a protein called cannabinoid receptor type-two. When that biological "button" is pushed, it soothes the immune system, increases bone mass and blocks pain signals.

Shaun said, "It's not dangerous. It just isn't."

But drug expert Mike Gimbel says medicinal marijuana is a joke.

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Mike said, "The goal of medical marijuana programs, in my opinion, is to make marijuana available to the general public, so they can have it without getting into trouble."

He says there are very limited studies on the benefits. In fact, a recent review by the American Medical Association found fewer than 20 randomized clinical trials of smoked marijuana for medical uses, which only involved 300 people total.

Unlike other drugs, marijuana has not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration. It has instead become a political issue in many states.

Mike said, "Why is marijuana being approved by politicians?" If they were serious about using it to help sick people, they would let the Food and Drug Administration handle it, because they know how to do it best."

Then there are the side effects. According to NIDA, a person's heart rate increases by 20 to 100 percent shortly after smoking. One study found pot users have almost a five-fold increased risk of heart attack during the first hour of smoking.

Some research has shown marijuana is linked to mental health conditions like schizophrenia. And there is the debate over whether it is addictive. Most estimates suggest about nine percent of users become addicted.

Mike said, "Is it addictive? Yes, and everyone knows it is. You can't solve this by legalizing it."

Shaun said, "My take on the marijuana battle is it is the most useless waste of energy that I have ever seen in my life."

So is marijuana an excuse for addiction or a real medical therapy? Right now, the answers are not clear-cut.

In a recent survey, 45 percent of people said they believe pot should be legalized.

In California, America's first Cannabis College has enrolled more than 17,000 students.

The idea is to teach them the correct way to grow and sell marijuana.

Research Summary

ADDICTION WARS: MARIJUANA: MEDICINE OR EASY HIGH?

MARIJUANA AS MEDICINE THROUGHOUT HISTORY: Cannabis has been used as medicine for over 4,000 years: the ancient Egyptians used cannabis to treat sore eyes, and cannabis was used to treat ear aches in ancient Greece. During the latter half of the 19th century, however, cannabis lost its image as a medicine and gained its image as a drug. In 1915, Utah was the first US state to pass an anti-marijuana law, and in 1924 cannabis was declared a narcotic at the Second International Opiates conference. The Marijuana Tax Act of 1937 effectively banned marijuana in the US, and in the 1970s, congress declared marijuana a schedule I controlled substance: it had no medicinal value and the highest potential for abuse. However, in 1996, California and Arizona became the first states to legalize marijuana for medical use under a doctor's supervision. Now, medicinal marijuana is legal in 15 states and Washington D.C. The first cannabis-based prescription medicine, a mouth spray called Sativex used to treat multiple sclerosis, was released in the UK in 2010.

PROS: People who support the use of medicinal marijuana often base their arguments on the fact that:

* Marijuana can ease the pain of a terminal illness (or in some cases, it can help ease symptoms that come as a side-effect of drugs used to treat terminal illnesses)

* Marijuana is seen as a safer, more natural way to deal with suffering associated with serious illnesses.

* There is less risk of addiction associated with marijuana.

* Out of the ten states that had legalized marijuana by the year 2006, eight states saw a decrease in teen use of marijuana between 1999 and 2006.

CONS: Those against the use of marijuana for medicinal purposes cite many concerns such as the health risks associated with marijuana and the "gateway effect," among others.

* There is a lack of legitimate, scientific studies showing marijuana's benefits, and its lack of FDA approval.

* Smoking marijuana leads to heart and lung health risks, as well as the risk of impairment of perception, judgment, learning and memory. In 2002, the British Lung Foundation reported that three to four marijuana cigarettes a day were just as damaging to the lungs as 20 tobacco cigarettes a day.

* Marijuana has long been considered a "gateway drug," meaning the use of marijuana can lead to harder drugs, such as cocaine or heroin.

(SOURCE: <http://medicalmarijuana.procon.org/>)

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