

Marijuana: Healthy or Harmful? Beliefs vs. Evidence



In the U.S., marijuana is a federally illegal substance. It is, however, being investigated for potential pain-relieving properties and the promise of some medical benefit. While many public health organizations are advocating on behalf of continued research to understand the health impact of marijuana, many states have passed local legislation, allowing marijuana to be used recreationally or medically under specific state guidelines.

Therapeutic Uses

Used therapeutically, marijuana may offer the following benefits to users:¹

- Decreasing pain associated with certain medical conditions
- Reducing inflammation
- Diminishing nausea in those undergoing chemotherapy
- Lessening eye pressure associated with glaucoma

These potential therapeutic benefits, along with legislative changes, may be the reason Americans now have more favorable view of marijuana – a view, however, that is not supported by a sufficient amount of evidence regarding its risks and benefits.²

Cause for Concern

Insufficient research, a decreasing view of harm, coupled with increases in marijuana's availability, marketing, and potency are cause for concern about marijuana's negative health effects including addiction, mental health, poisoning, and risk of using other drugs.

Another cause for concern is "believing the hype." Without sufficient scientific evidence of marijuana's risks and rewards, some people may rely on what they think or believe about marijuana rather than what is fact.

For example, though some cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy find relief from nausea with medically recommended marijuana products, there is not enough evidence to suggest marijuana as a treatment to control or cure cancer.³ The concern, then, is that the

Effects of Smoked Marijuana

Like tobacco, smoking marijuana can harm lung tissues and increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. One study showed that those who smoke marijuana take in three times the amount of tar as those who don't.⁵ Tar is the harmful chemical that can damage the lungs and lead to cancer.

Long-term marijuana smoking also has been associated with respiratory problems, including coughing, wheezing, bronchitis, sputum, and inflammation.⁶

person may delay or even avoid conventional medical treatment, putting their health or very life at risk.

Brain Health

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) has cautioned the public on the effect of marijuana on the brain. The use of cannabis has been shown to affect a person's:⁴

- Attention
- Coordination
- Decision making
- Emotions
- Learning
- Memory
- Reaction time

Effects aren't universal, of course, and depend upon a number of factors including the person, the amount and frequency of use, the age the person started using, and the level of THC in the marijuana.

Heart Health

The brain isn't the only part of the body affected by marijuana. Using marijuana increases the risk of stroke and heart disease. As its potency has increased so, too, has its cardiovascular consequences – many the same as smoking tobacco.⁷

In fact, an estimated 2+ million adults with cardiovascular disease have reported using marijuana, so more studies, screening, and testing are needed to better understand the connection.

In addition, the main psychoactive ingredient in marijuana, THC, also has been linked to increase risk of atrial fibrillation, heart attack, and heart failure.

About This Campaign

Because much of the public conversation surrounding marijuana has been based on anecdotes rather than science, Prevention Action Alliance and the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services created this campaign to help people better understand the facts about marijuana and its effects.

If you found this article helpful, we encourage you to share it with others. You can also find other fact sheets about marijuana at: preventionactionalliance.org/marijuana

If you have concerns about your own use of marijuana or a loved one's, and wish to seek help, go to: findtreatment.samhsa.gov/

Contact Us

For more information about marijuana and health, please contact us at:

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About Us

Prevention
Action Alliance



Prevention Action Alliance is a 501(c)3 nonprofit located in Columbus, Ohio. We're dedicated to leading healthy communities in the prevention of substance misuse and the promotion of mental health wellness. Learn more at preventionactionalliance.org.

The mission of the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services (OhioMHAS) is to provide statewide leadership on the topics of mental health and addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery. Learn more about OhioMHAS at mha.ohio.gov.

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2. acpjournals.org/doi/10.7326/M18-0810

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5. medicinenet.com/script/main/art.asp?articlekey=245173

6. adai.uw.edu/marijuana/factsheets/respiratoryeffects.htm

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