

Teacher Fact Sheet: Marijuana

Marijuana is the most commonly used illegal drug in the United States. Marijuana is a dry mixture of shredded flowers, stems, seeds, and leaves of the hemp plant *Cannabis sativa*. It is greenish-brown in color and has a distinct odor sometimes described as sweet-and-sour. Marijuana is usually smoked as a cigarette (called a *joint*) or in a pipe (called a *bong*). Occasionally, it is made into *blunts*, which are cigar wrappers emptied of their original tobacco content and refilled with marijuana. Other ways to ingest marijuana involve mixing it in with foods, or brewing it as a tea. There are countless names used to refer to marijuana, including pot, herb, weed, grass, widow, ganja, Mary Jane, and hash.

Marijuana is illegal for good reason – it puts people at risk. **When people use marijuana, they are exposing their bodies to significant health, social, learning, and behavioral problems.**

The cannabis plant contains an active chemical called delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol, or THC.



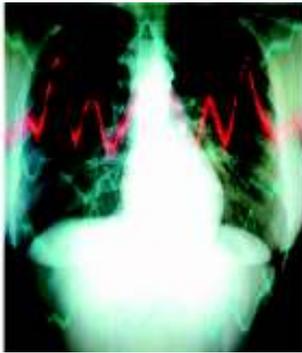
When marijuana is smoked, THC is inhaled, travels through the bloodstream, and connects to a receptor in the brain. While some people think that smoking marijuana is harmless and will not affect the user, research proves otherwise. Marijuana use has negative short-term and long-term effects on the body. Furthermore, marijuana can be addictive, which means that teens (or whoever smokes it) can become hooked. More teenagers seek treatment every year for a dependence on marijuana than for all other illegal drug use combined.

Short-term effects caused by marijuana use include problems with memory and learning. It also distorts perception and can cause difficulty in thinking and problem solving. Users lose their coordination abilities and have increased heart rates. Sometimes, anxiety and panic are accompanying side effects. While these may seem like unimportant effects, they actually have a very big impact. With impaired decision-making and perception, a person can easily enter dangerous situations or succumb to peer-pressure. Pairing these effects with the loss of coordination makes marijuana one of the leading causes for drug-related car accidents. When marijuana and alcohol use are combined, the likelihood of the user's involvement in a car accident becomes even greater. This means that you should never get into a car with someone who has recently smoked marijuana.

Marijuana use affects nearly every part of a person's life. Even after the short-term effects of marijuana have diminished, the user's body will continue to suffer from the drug use. **Recent evidence shows that smoking marijuana can lead to increased risks of serious mental health problems. Especially for teens, marijuana use can lead to depression, suicidal tendencies, and schizophrenia. Other studies have shown that marijuana might cause certain types of cancer if it is smoked heavily.** Even if marijuana use does not lead to permanent brain damage, it will still have the potential to negatively affect the present. Adolescents who use marijuana are much more likely to be involved in abusing other drugs and committing illegal acts.



Teacher Fact Sheet: Marijuana (Continued)



People who smoke marijuana frequently may experience many of the same problems that tobacco users have, including lung damage. Some of the side effects include daily coughing, phlegm, and more frequent chest colds. If the drug use continues, the effects can lead to injury or destruction of the lung tissues. Marijuana smokers inhale high levels of tar and large amounts of carbon dioxide, both of which are materials that cause damage to the user's body. This is not too surprising given the fact that marijuana smoke leads to changes in the brain that are similar to those caused by heroin, cocaine, and alcohol.

The effects of marijuana are not confined to physical problems, because when someone “gets high” on marijuana, their mental capabilities are also affected. A teen brain is different than an adult brain in many ways. The limbic system in the brain, the area that controls memory and emotions, is highly developed, whereas the prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for judgment, is still developing well into a person's 20s. This probably accounts for the fact that teens tend to make decisions based on their emotions rather than by using reason. **Marijuana users regularly experience impaired judgment.** This means that when they are in situations where their decisions have big impact, they might make the wrong decision – like getting into a car with someone who is high or committing illegal activities. It is easy to make the wrong decisions when marijuana is affecting the brain's control of decision-making and perception. Smoking marijuana can have many negative consequences, from bad grades and broken friendships to trouble with the law or family problems.

The limbic system is also highly influenced by THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), the active ingredient in marijuana. Thus the same centers of the brain responsible for memory formation, emotion, aggression and fear are significantly affected by marijuana!

Marijuana affects the regions in the brain that are responsible for the five senses, heart rate, emotions, memory, and judgment. The brain can be impacted by very small amounts of chemicals entering the bloodstream, and using marijuana appears to be more dangerous than what was believed even 10 years ago.



Experimenting with marijuana is not a safe alternative to regular drug use. It is a proven fact that marijuana is addictive, so even experimentation has its risks. The damages that marijuana causes to the brain, lungs, and mind, are **not** worth the experience of smoking it. Some of the effects of marijuana will go away hours or days after the person is finished smoking. Other physical effects can last a lifetime, and the decisions that are made while a person is high on marijuana can lead to consequences for years to come.

REFERENCES:

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