



Marijuana basics and effects

As more states make it legal to use marijuana, you may have questions about this drug. What is it? What does it do? What are the risks? We've put together some basic facts about marijuana to help you better understand marijuana and its effects.

What is marijuana?

Marijuana is a drug that comes from a hemp plant called *Cannabis sativa*. Marijuana has a lot of "street" names. These include:

- Pot
- Weed

- Mary Jane
- Bud
- Ganja and more

The "high" people often feel when they use marijuana comes from a chemical called THC. THC is short for tetrahydrocannabinol.

Why do people use marijuana?

The THC in marijuana binds to parts of the brain responsible for feeling pleasure and pain.¹ People tend to take it because it makes them feel relaxed and happy.

Medical marijuana

Some people may use marijuana for medical purposes. There's not much research about marijuana's benefits because it's illegal in many places. But people commonly use it to help with:²

- Pain
- Multiple sclerosis
- Nausea
- Epilepsy

How does marijuana affect people who use it?

Marijuana's effects are more potent than they used to be. This is because the amount of THC in marijuana almost doubled from the early 1990s to 2013.³

Marijuana affects people differently. One person may feel relaxed while another feels anxious and panicked. People who take too much may suffer from psychosis – i.e. seeing and hearing things that aren't there.

Short-term effects may include:

- Changed sense of taste, smell, touch, sight or hearing
- Altered sense of time
- Changes in mood (anxiety, sadness, etc.)
- Impaired body movement and reaction time
- Trouble thinking, problem-solving, learning and recalling things
- Increased heart rate

Long-term effects may include:

- Breathing problems
- Problems with memory
- Trouble shifting concentration from one thing to another
- Increased risk of schizophrenia, anxiety or depression
- Trouble focusing for long periods of time
- Decreased fertility
- Addiction

Heavy marijuana users also report less success at work and school. And it's been linked to more job absences, accidents and injuries.⁴

Is marijuana addictive?

First, let's define addiction. Drug addiction is an illness. People with a drug addiction often crave a drug, even after the drug is out of their systems. People with addictions may seek out and use drugs even when their drug use causes problems in their lives.

Drug addiction often includes dependence. Dependence happens when you take enough of a drug that your body changes so that it needs that drug. If you're dependent on a drug and suddenly stop using it, your body will have withdrawal symptoms. For example, people who quit using marijuana have reported sleep problems, anxiety, irritability and aggression.⁵

Many people think you can't get addicted to marijuana. But research suggests that 30 percent of people who use marijuana develop some kind of problem with the drug. And adults who started using marijuana before they turned 18 are four to seven times more likely to have problems with the drug.⁴

What are some other concerns about marijuana use?

Outside of addiction and some of its troubling long-term effects, marijuana raises some unique concerns.

Marijuana and young people

One thing is clear – marijuana is a problem for young users. Studies have shown that people who started using marijuana as teens and continued to use as adults lost an average of eight IQ points. And the loss of mental abilities didn't return once they quit. But those who started using marijuana as adults didn't show the same mental declines.³

Why is this? Our brains develop until we're about 25 years old. Using drugs during that time may impact the brain's ability to fully mature. So, it's important to prevent young people from using marijuana.

Marijuana is linked to other drug problems

You've likely heard people say that marijuana is a "gateway drug." They argue that marijuana use leads to bigger drug-related problems.

We know that people who use marijuana tend to use more legal and illegal drugs than those who don't.⁶ And 99 percent of illegal drug users tried marijuana before any other drugs.⁷ But is it a "gateway"? Does it create those drug issues?

It's hard to say for sure that marijuana use causes people to use other, "harder" drugs. In fact, some have argued that alcohol is the true gateway drug since most teens report using alcohol before trying marijuana or cigarettes.⁷

It could be that these people were already at risk for drug misuse and happened to start with marijuana. All we know right now is that there's a relationship between marijuana use and other drug problems.

Marijuana and impaired driving

Marijuana impairs judgment, motor function and reaction time. These are all important factors in safe driving.

Two large studies found that drivers with THC in their blood were about twice as likely to cause fatal accidents as those who did not use any drugs or alcohol. And if people drive after using marijuana and drinking alcohol, the risk is even greater.⁸

Similar to drinking and driving, it's important that people don't use marijuana and then drive or operate heavy machinery.

Getting help for marijuana use

If you're worried about marijuana use in yourself or another person, treatment can help. Treatment often consists of therapy. And it may include medication to help with other issues like anxiety or depression.

To learn more about finding help with marijuana use, here are some resources:

- The Partnership for Drug-Free Kids provides resources and information for parents. They also offer a free marijuana talk kit online. Visit the Drug-free website or call **1-855-DRUGFREE** for more information.
- The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers support to those who may have substance use and mental health-related issues. Go to the SAMHSA website or call **1-800-662-HELP** to find out more.
- The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) provides a lot of information about marijuana, its effects and treatments. You can visit the NIDA website [here](#).
- Your insurance company or Employee Assistance Program (EAP) may help you find counselors or programs in your area.

¹ National Institute on Drug Abuse. How does marijuana produce its effects? Accessed August 2018.

² CNN Health. 7 uses for medical marijuana. April 16, 2015. Accessed August 2018.

³ National Institute on Drug Abuse for Teens. Marijuana. Drug Facts. Accessed August 2018.

⁴ National Institute on Drug Abuse. What is marijuana? Accessed August 2018.

⁵ T., Buddy. Basic facts about marijuana. Very Well Mind. February 14, 2018. Accessed August 2018.

⁶ DuPont, Robert. [Marijuana has proven to be a gateway drug](#). The New York Times. April 26, 2016. Accessed August 2018.

⁷ Ingraham, Christopher. The real 'gateway drug' is 100% legal. The Washington Post. January 6, 2016. Accessed August 2018.

⁸ National Institute on Drug Abuse. Does marijuana use affect driving? Accessed August 2018.