



## Frequently Asked Questions about the Health Effects of Marijuana

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- **What are the potential short-term effects of using marijuana?**
  - A “high” feeling (intoxication), which can include feelings of euphoria, laughter, relaxation, changes in sensory perception, and changes in mood
  - Decreased interest in normal activities
  - Impairment of the following: short-term memory; attention and judgment; thinking, learning, and remembering; coordination, balance, and reaction time; and sleep
  - Increased appetite
  - Increased heart rate (20%–100% increase) and blood pressure
  - Paranoia, anxiety
  - Psychosis (uncommon)—e.g., hallucinations, delusions, loss of self-identity
  - Red eyes
  
- **How long does it take to feel the effects?**
  - 5–10 minutes after marijuana is smoked.
  - 30 min to 2 hours after marijuana is eaten.
  
- **How long do the short-term effects generally last?**
  - 2–3 hours after marijuana is smoked.
  - 4–10 hours after marijuana is eaten.
  
- **What are the long-term health effects of using marijuana?**

The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment recently published a report that examines the strength of evidence of potential adverse health consequences of marijuana use (available at: [https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/DC\\_MJ-Monitoring-Health-Concerns-Related-to-Marijuana-in-CO-2014.pdf](https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/DC_MJ-Monitoring-Health-Concerns-Related-to-Marijuana-in-CO-2014.pdf)).

  - The authors found *substantial* evidence that marijuana use can lead to the following effects:
    - Addiction (see below)
    - Psychotic symptoms or disorders like schizophrenia
    - Chronic bronchitis with cough, wheezing, and sputum production
    - Precancerous lesions in the airways
    - Increased risk of driving impairment at blood THC concentrations of 2–5 ng/mL
    - Increased risk of motor vehicle crash

- The authors found *moderate* evidence that marijuana use can lead to the following effects:
  - If used by pregnant or breastfeeding mothers, marijuana may lead to decreased IQ scores, attention problems, decreased growth, decreased cognitive function, and decreased academic ability in children.
  - If used by adolescents, marijuana may lead to impaired cognitive abilities and academic performance, less high school graduation, increased use and addiction after adolescence, and alcohol or tobacco use and addiction after adolescence.
  - Depression
- **What is the primary active ingredient in marijuana and how does it work?**
  - Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the primary chemical that causes the psychological (mind-altering) effects of marijuana.
  - THC binds to receptors in the brain that influence learning and memory, appetite, coordination, and pleasure.
- **What is addiction, and what proportion of marijuana users become addicted?**
  - Addiction refers to an inability to stop using a drug despite harmful consequences; failure to meet work, social, or family obligations; and sometimes dependence (characterized by tolerance and/or withdrawal symptoms).
  - All users: according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, about 9% of marijuana users become addicted.
  - Adolescents: about 17% of people who begin using marijuana during adolescence and early adulthood (ages 13–25 years) become addicted.
  - Daily users: about 25% – 50% of people who are daily users become addicted.
- **What are the symptoms of marijuana withdrawal?**
  - Symptoms of marijuana withdrawal include mood changes (e.g., anxiety, irritability, depressed mood, or restlessness), disturbed sleep, gastrointestinal symptoms, and decreased appetite.
  - Most symptoms begin during the first week of withdrawal and resolve after a few weeks.
- **What are the unique risks of marijuana use to adolescents?**
  - The brain is developing until a person is at least 21 years of age; during this time, the brain is more vulnerable to the negative long-term effects of marijuana.
  - Marijuana use during adolescence may lead to impaired cognitive abilities and academic performance, less high school graduation, increased use and addiction after adolescence, and alcohol or tobacco use and addiction after adolescence.
  - People who begin using marijuana during adolescence are more likely to develop addiction than people who begin using as adults.
- **Is marijuana known to be safe for pregnant or breastfeeding women?**
  - No, there is no known safe amount of marijuana use during pregnancy or breastfeeding.
  - THC can pass through the placenta from the mother to the developing fetus, and the effects of THC on the fetus are poorly understood.
  - Smoking passes carbon monoxide to the unborn child, which can negatively affect the fetus.
  - THC can also be passed through the mother's breast milk, potentially affecting the baby.
  - Marijuana can impair judgment and memory, and could put children at risk of harm if a parent or guardian is using.

- **Does marijuana affect the ability to drive?**
  - Yes. Driving while high on marijuana is unsafe because THC alters the driver’s motor performance, perception, and concentration. People should not drive while high on marijuana.
  - People should avoid using marijuana when performing other safety sensitive activities that could put themselves or others at risk (e.g., operating heavy machinery, biking, downhill skiing, and playing team sports).
  
- **Is secondhand smoke from marijuana harmful?**
  - Secondhand smoke from marijuana may cause lung irritation, asthma attacks, and may make respiratory infections more likely.
  - Secondhand smoke from marijuana contains many of the same harmful chemicals as smoke from tobacco.
  - Very little THC is exhaled back into the air, so there is little evidence that a secondhand “contact” high could occur.
  
- **What are the potential medical benefits of marijuana?**
  - Marijuana may help reduce adverse symptoms of certain medical conditions, including :
    - Glaucoma
    - Nausea
    - AIDS-associated anorexia and wasting syndrome
    - Chronic Pain
    - Inflammation
    - Multiple Sclerosis
    - Epilepsy
  
- **Can a person overdose on marijuana?**
  - Yes. This is sometimes called “greening out”.
  - Signs and symptoms of marijuana overdose may include paranoia, fear, anxiety, shortness of breath, dilated pupils, nausea and vomiting, increased heart rate, feeling cold with shaking chills, disorientation, and hallucinations.
  - The overdose effects typically subside after minutes to hours; however, serious medical consequences can occur. Examples of more severe effects include difficulty breathing, pale skin color, a very fast heart rate, or unresponsiveness; people experiencing these symptoms while overdosing require immediate medical intervention.
  - Marijuana products come in a variety of concentrations, some of which are considerably more potent than the marijuana used in the past. Be aware of the concentration you are using to avoid accidentally consuming too much.
  - Using marijuana in combination with alcohol or other mind-altering drugs is likely to result in greater impairment than either one alone.
  
- **What are the particular risks associated with edible marijuana products?**
  - Overdose due to overconsumption of THC.
  - Accidental exposure, especially in children and pets.

- **What recommendations are given to medical marijuana patients for appropriate dosing?**
  - Appropriate dosing depends on many factors, including the strength of the marijuana (i.e., percent concentration of THC), the individual’s prior experience with marijuana, the route of exposure (e.g., smoking vs. eating), and the person’s body mass and age.
  - The Mayo Clinic provides dosing instructions for commercially available products for a range of medical conditions (see: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/drugs-supplements/marijuana/dosing/hrb-20059701>).
  - Talk with your doctor or health care provider to find out what is best for your particular health concern.
  
- **Can marijuana be a gateway drug for some users?**
  - For a subset of users who are more vulnerable to drug addiction, marijuana use might be a risk factor for experimentation with more serious drugs of abuse.
  
- **How do I talk to my kids about marijuana use?**
  - Ask what they have heard about using marijuana. Listen carefully, pay attention and do not interrupt. Avoid making negative or angry comments.
  - Emphasize the fact that most kids don’t use marijuana; only 39% of high school students reported ever using marijuana in Alaska in 2013.
  - Start conversations early, before their teenage years.
  - Give your child coaching on ways to avoid and say no to marijuana, alcohol, and tobacco.
  - Set clear guidelines and expectations.
  - Stay involved in your child’s social life at home and in school through frequent and effective communication.
  - Be mindful of your own behavior and how that might affect your child’s decisions regarding substance use.
  - For more information about each of these tips, please review Seattle Children’s “A parent’s guide to preventing underage marijuana use.” Available at: <http://learnaboutmarijuanawa.org/parentpreventionbooklet2014.pdf>
  
- **What marijuana addiction treatment resources are available in Alaska?**
  - The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has staff ready to assist people in finding drug abuse treatment options close to their home.
    - SAMHSA’s 24/7 Treatment Referral Line: 800-662-HELP (4357)
    - SAMHSA’s Find Treatment website: <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>
    - Additional information: <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment/substance-use-disorders>