

Marijuana: What Parents Need to Know

Teens say that marijuana (cannabis) is easy to get, and it tends to be the first illegal drug they try. Marijuana use is often portrayed as harmless, but the truth is that marijuana can be an addictive drug, especially for teens, that can cause serious risks and consequences.

Many people today learn about drugs while they are very young and might be tempted to try them. As a parent, you are your child's first and best protection against drug use. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics about marijuana and how to help your child say "No" to drug use. (*Child* refers to child or teen in this publication.)

Note: In most medical marijuana states, doctors can recommend medical marijuana for almost any condition. Though there may be some benefit of cannabinoids (the active ingredients in marijuana) use in adults with specific diagnoses, there have been no studies of cannabinoids use in children and adolescents. Also, all patients need to be aware that there can be side effects.

How Marijuana Is Used

Dried marijuana plant material is usually rolled with tobacco into cigarette *joints* or cigar *blunts* and smoked. Some users mix it in food or brew a tea. Other drugs, like PCP (phencyclidine) or crack cocaine, can also be added to the joint, increasing the dangers from use.

How Marijuana Use Affects Health and Well-being

School

Marijuana users often have a hard time thinking clearly, concentrating, remembering things, and solving problems. Frequent marijuana use often causes grades to drop. Regular and heavy users often lose interest in school and may quit.

Driving and Physical Activity

Marijuana impairs judgment, complex motor skills, and the ability to judge speed and time. Those who drive or take other risks after smoking marijuana are much more likely to be injured or killed.

Sexual Health

Teens who smoke marijuana are more likely to take sexual risks and have unwanted or unprotected sex.

Long-term Health

Teens' bodies and brains are still growing and maturing, so smoking anything, including marijuana, is not good for lung health. Marijuana use may also lead to addiction or mental health problems (ie, depression, anxiety, or schizophrenia). Regular marijuana use can alter normal brain development in adolescents.

Marijuana Is an Addictive Drug

Just like with alcohol, nicotine, and other illicit drug use, children who smoke marijuana can lose control over their use and become addicted. Many people overlook marijuana addiction because its withdrawal symptoms are not prominent or may not be

present at all. However, withdrawal is only one symptom of addiction.

Teens who are addicted to marijuana likely smoke several times a week or more. Although most believe they are in control and can quit at any time, most can't. Those using marijuana heavily often perform poorly in school or sports, lose interest in hobbies, and develop interpersonal problems with family and friends. Teens continuing to use marijuana into adulthood tend to have lower job achievement and less stable families than their siblings who don't use drugs. As with alcohol, the younger a person is when starting marijuana use, the more likely she will become addicted.

Signs of Marijuana Use

Recognizing the signs of drug use is the first step in getting help for your child, but some signs are vague. Consider marijuana or other drug use if your child

- Spends less time with family and friends and more time alone or away from home
- Often seems moody or irritable
- Begins to skip classes, often shows up late for school, or has a drop in grades
- Buys things like T-shirts with pro-marijuana messages or symbols
- Loses interest in hobbies
- Comes home *high* (talkative, giggly, red or glassy eyes) or goes straight to his room
- Smells of marijuana
- Possesses drugs or drug paraphernalia

What You Can Do

Take these steps to help prevent your child from becoming interested in using marijuana or other drugs.

- **Set high expectations and clear limits.** Instill strong values. Let your child know that you expect her *not* to use drugs. Teach her healthy values that are important to your family and to use these values when deciding what is right and wrong.
- **Talk with your child about the dangers of drug use, including marijuana.** Young people who do not know the facts may try drugs just to see what they are like. Start talking with your child at an early age about the dangers of drug use. Encourage him to ask questions and tell you about his concerns. Be sure to really listen. Do not lecture or do all the talking. Ask what he thinks about drug use and its risks.
- **Use teachable moments.** Discuss car crashes and other tragedies that are caused by drug use and are in the news or your child's life.
- **Help your child handle peer pressure.** Peers and others can strongly influence young people to try drugs. As a parent, your

influence can be even stronger in helping your child learn to be confident, make healthy choices, and resist unhealthy peer pressure. Tell her that it is OK to say “No!” to risky behaviors and mean what she says. Help her find and spend time enjoying positive interests that build self-esteem.

From Your Doctor

- **Help your child deal with emotions.** Especially during the teen years, many young people face strong emotions for the first time. Teens sometimes get depressed or anxious and might consider drug use to try to escape these feelings and forget problems. Explain that everyone has these feelings at times, so it is important for each person to learn how to express his feelings, cope with them, and face stressors in healthy ways that can help prevent or resolve problems.
- **Set a good example.** Avoid using tobacco and illicit drugs. Minimize alcohol use, and always avoid drinking and driving. Be a good role model in the ways you express, control, and relieve stress, pain, or tension. Actions do speak louder than words!
- **Get a professional evaluation.** If you think your child is using drugs, tell your child’s doctor your exact concerns. Your child’s doctor can help.

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