

Marijuana is the illegal drug most often used in North America.

Research has unveiled a number of dangers associated with marijuana use. This pamphlet explains some of those dangers while offering parents and other adults helpful information for preventing marijuana use among teens.

About marijuana

Marijuana is made from the leaves and flowers of the hemp plant (*Cannabis sativa*). It is dried, shredded and smoked, just like tobacco, although it also can be added to baked goods, such as brownies, and eaten.

Marijuana smoke has a distinctive, smoky smell that can cling to a user's hair and clothes long after use.

Plant strain, climate, soil conditions, time of harvesting, and other factors determine the potency of marijuana. In recent years the strength of street samples of marijuana has markedly increased. In 1975, samples exceeding 1% THC content were rare; in 1990, samples with 4% THC and more were common — that's an increase of 400% potency. The more potent marijuana increases the physical and mental affects on the user.

How marijuana affects a user depends on four factors: its strength or THC content; what the user expects to happen; the user's circumstances (for instance, what the user is doing and who he or she is with); and whether the user is under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Some people feel nothing when they smoke marijuana. Others report feeling relaxed. Still others report negative effects. They may suffer feelings of anxiety or panic and have paranoid thoughts. This occurs more often when potent varieties of marijuana are used.

Signs of regular marijuana use

- Low tolerance for frustration and defiant, rebellious behavior
- Poor impulse control
- Unpredictable, wide-ranging mood swings, including sudden outbursts of anger, crying or laughter and depression
- Confused thinking and problems remembering recent events or conversations
- Inappropriate responses to authority figures — teachers, coaches, parents
- Poor grades, lateness or absenteeism at school
- Loss of interest in family, non-drug-using friends and healthy social activities
- Brushes with the law or other authority figures that require some kind of sanction

These characteristics may be caused by a behavioral problem or a problem with a drug other than marijuana. The key is to look for any change in old behaviors — a drop in school performance, new friends, changes in personality or personal hygiene habits.

Why teens use

Many teens try marijuana because of peer pressure or they want to fit in with friends. Others try it out of curiosity — they've heard stories from their friends who use, and they want to try it themselves. Others use because smoking it is a normal part of their family experience. They have a brother, sister or parent who uses.

Some teens use marijuana to cope with the many unfamiliar emotions that are typical of adolescence — anxiety, depression, anger, boredom and other uncomfortable feelings. But trying to cope with these normal experiences in this way only causes more difficulty. Research shows that marijuana interferes with emotional growth and hinders the normal development of learning and social skills.

These are just two of several reasons why it's important that teens not use marijuana. Among the others:

- **Marijuana use is illegal.** Possession or use of marijuana is a criminal offense punishable by fines, imprisonment or both.
- **Marijuana affects normal reaction time.** Because it affects a user's depth perception and reaction time, marijuana users are at higher risk for car accidents.
- **Marijuana affects the ability to think rationally.** Someone under the influence of marijuana isn't likely to consider the consequences of having sex — like getting pregnant or getting a sexually transmitted disease like the virus that causes AIDS.
- **Marijuana affects motivation.** Frequent users of marijuana feel tired or rundown, which is why some are referred to as "burnouts."
- **Marijuana harms the body.** Marijuana can have harmful consequences on a person's respiratory, immune and cardiovascular systems. Also, the drug is sometimes laced with harmful chemicals — such as PCP, the powerful psychoactive drug — that increase its potency and place users at additional risk. Many times, users aren't even aware that these dangerous chemicals have been added.

Tips for parents

Here are some suggestions for helping young people lead a drug-free life:

- **Start talking about drugs early.** Don't expect one conversation about alcohol or other drugs to make a difference in your child's life. Education takes time. When a child is first exposed to alcohol and tobacco advertisements or to stories related to the consequences of drug use is when adults should begin expressing their values and expectations.
- **Be a good role model.** Adults have a significant influence on young people's choices in life. Model the behavior you expect from children by not using illicit drugs.