

Marijuana: Your Child and Drugs



Young people today can face strong peer pressure to try drugs. As a parent, you are your child's first and best protection against drug use. The first step is to become informed yourself. The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed this brochure to help you learn about marijuana and how you can help your child withstand pressure to use it.

Marijuana comes from the cannabis plant and looks like dried leaves. It is smoked either in a pipe or a hand-rolled cigarette, called a "joint." Other common names for marijuana are pot, weed, grass, herb, and reefer.

Marijuana is fairly easy for young people to get. It also tends to be the first illegal drug they try. After smoking marijuana, teens may go on to try "harder" drugs, such as cocaine and LSD.

Teens' use of marijuana has gone up in recent years. Among high school students, marijuana is one of the most widely abused drugs. A 1995 national survey of American high school seniors showed that:

- 41% have used marijuana at some time in their lives
- 21% used it in the past 30 days
- 4.6% use marijuana every day
- 88% said the drug is fairly easy or very easy to get

About one third of marijuana smokers start using the drug by sixth grade.

These statistics are cause for concern. Another concern is that marijuana today is about 25 times stronger than it was in the 1960s. THC, the main ingredient in marijuana, builds up in the body over time. The more a person smokes, the more THC builds up. It can take several weeks for the body to get rid of chemicals from just one marijuana cigarette. Besides THC, marijuana contains more than 400 other chemicals that can be health hazards.

Some short-term effects of smoking marijuana include:

- Calm, relaxed, sleepy feeling
- Increased appetite
- Dry, bloodshot eyes; dry throat and mouth
- Increased heart rate
- Slowed reaction time
- Poor short-term memory
- Anxiety, panic attacks, or paranoia

Why young people are at risk

Over time, marijuana may cause serious physical effects in teens who are still growing and maturing. These include:

- Lower sperm count and testosterone levels in males (Testosterone is a hormone that controls hair and penis growth, muscle mass, and voice changes during puberty.)
- Irregular menstrual periods and ovulation in females, which can lead to infertility
- Heart and lung damage
- Cancer

- Memory problems
- Psychological dependence on the drug

Marijuana can make it difficult for a person to think, listen, speak, remember things, solve problems, and form concepts. It can also affect how well your teen does in school. Heavy, chronic marijuana smokers often have less drive and ambition.

The effects of marijuana can make driving or playing sports risky. This is because marijuana impairs complex motor skills and the ability to judge speed and time. Using drugs like marijuana increases the risk of injury, such as from vehicle crashes.

In adolescence, sexual feelings are evolving and changing. Smoking marijuana can confuse these feelings and cause your teen to take sexual chances. This could lead to an unplanned pregnancy or a sexually transmitted disease (including HIV, the virus that causes AIDS).

Why do young people try marijuana?

There are many reasons why young people use drugs. Some of the most common reasons are:

- To fit in with their friends
- To avoid dealing with strong emotions or problems
- Because they are curious
- To rebel and be different
- For a quick way to feel good and have fun
- Because some media show drug use as "cool" or normal and not having any bad effects

Some teens may think using marijuana will make them "cool" or seem more adult-like. They need to know that marijuana use is not a normal step in growing up, despite what their peers may say.

Stages of marijuana use

There are three stages of drug use that can occur:

- **Casual use.** There is strong peer pressure to enter this stage, where a teen usually smokes marijuana to feel good and have fun. He or she still limits drug use in this stage.
- **Heavier use.** The user enters this stage when he or she starts to build a tolerance to marijuana. This is when a person needs more and more of a drug to get the same effects as before. You may notice behavior changes in this stage (see the box on this page). Your teen's schoolwork also may slip. Problems that develop at home and at school because of drug use may cause a teen to use even more drugs.
- **Dependency.** In this stage there is a real loss of control over drug use. The user now feels that he or she needs marijuana to get through the day. Without it, he or she may become angry or withdrawn. Because heavy use is costly, a teen may lie and steal from family and friends to be able to buy marijuana. This could lead to trouble with the law.

Whether or not someone becomes a heavy user will depend on his or her reasons for smoking marijuana in the first place. Being able to recognize the signs of abuse is the first step in getting help for your teen.

Signs your child may be using marijuana

Your child:

- Has red eyes; uses eye drops a lot
- Is hungry often and even gains weight
- Is less motivated and has an "I don't care" attitude
- Withdraws from the family; spends more time in his or her room or away from home
- Forgets things; has trouble paying attention or communicating
- Buys things like CDs and T-shirts with pro-marijuana messages or symbols
- Starts missing school or shows a drop in school grades
- Has new friends and interests; gives up old hobbies, sports, or other activities

How to help your child say "no" to marijuana

Talk with your teen about drugs: Young people who do not know the facts about drugs may try them just to see what they are like. After you become informed, talk with your teen about marijuana and its harmful effects. Try to get your teen to share any questions and concerns he or she has. Be sure to really listen to your teen; do not lecture or do all the talking.

Help your teen handle peer pressure: Peers and friends can strongly influence your teen to try marijuana. As a parent, your influence can be just as strong to help your teen be independent and resist peer pressure. Tell him or her that it is okay to say "no" to marijuana and mean it. Your teen might respond to friends by saying, "I tried marijuana and didn't like it," or "I would get in a lot of trouble if my parents ever found out." Practice these and other responses with your son or daughter. If a friend is offering the marijuana, it may be harder to say "no." Your teen can suggest other things to do with that friend. This shows that your teen is rejecting the drug, not the friend.

Help your teen deal with emotions: During the teen years, many young people face strong emotions for the first time. These new feelings can be hard to cope with, and your teen may sometimes get depressed or anxious. He or she may turn to marijuana to escape such feelings and forget problems. It is important to talk with your teen about any concerns and problems he or she is facing. Assure your teen that everything has an upside, and things do not stay "bad" for very long. Point out that even after using marijuana or other drugs, the same problems and hassles are still there.

Enhance your teen's self-confidence: Praise the positive qualities in your teen often. Encourage your son or daughter to set goals and make personal decisions to achieve them. With each success, your teen will gain more confidence. Applaud effort as well as success. As your teen becomes more responsible, you can still provide guidance, emotional support, and security when needed. Becoming responsible also means facing the results of one's

actions—good or bad. Making mistakes is a normal part of growing up; so try not to be too critical when your son or daughter makes a mistake.

Instill strong values in your teen. Teach your son or daughter the values that are important to your family. Also teach him or her to think of these values when deciding what is right and wrong. Explain that these are the standards your family lives by, despite what other people are doing.

Be a good role model: As a parent, you should avoid use of marijuana and other drugs. You are the best role model for your teen. Make a stand against drug issues—your teen will listen.

Encourage healthy ways to have fun: Young people are always looking for ways to have fun. They can also get bored easily. Drugs offer what seems to be a carefree "high" with little or no effort. Help your teen develop an interest in different hobbies, clubs, and activities. Look for healthy ways to reduce boredom and too much free time. Take an active interest in what is important to your teen.

Realize that not all young people will resist the lure of drugs. If your teen is using marijuana, he or she needs your help. Know the signs of marijuana use. Being able to recognize these signs is the first step in getting help for your teen. Pediatricians, family members, teachers, youth groups, mental health professionals, and clergy can provide support for your teen to stop smoking marijuana. If the problem is too much for you to handle on your own, get professional help. Your teen may need counseling, a support group, and/or a treatment program.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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