

Developing a Better Understanding

MARIJUANA PREVENTION FOR TEENS

The teen years are a time of growth, exploration, and risk-taking. Some risk-taking may foster identity development and independence. However, some risk behaviors—such as using marijuana—can have adverse effects on a teen’s health and well-being. Marijuana refers to the dried leaves, flowers, stems, and seeds from the hemp plant, Cannabis Sativa. The plant contains the mind-altering chemical delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and other related compounds. Extracts can also be made from the cannabis plant. While scientists are still learning about the risks and benefits of using marijuana, numerous studies have shown that marijuana use can harm a teen’s health and well-being. The teen brain is actively developing and continues to develop until around age 25. Marijuana use during adolescence and young adulthood may harm the developing brain. Marijuana addiction is more common among teens than adults because their brains are still developing and vulnerable. Some teens make the mistake of believing that marijuana can help reduce issues with ADHD or anxiety and improve their focus in school.

Fast Facts

- When asked, about 1 in 14 teens say they used marijuana in the past month.
- Some think marijuana is okay to use because it’s “natural.” But not all natural plants are beneficial—take tobacco, for example.
- Some teens believe marijuana can’t be that harmful if states are legalizing it. Legal or not, one real risk is addiction.
- In 2016, around 4 million people ages 12 and older had a marijuana use disorder.

Source: NIDA

Negative Effects of Teen Marijuana Use Include:

- Difficulty thinking and problem-solving
- Problems with memory and learning
- Reduced coordination
- Difficulty maintaining attention
- Problems with school and social life

Source: CDC

Adolescents who use marijuana can experience an increase in difficulty memorizing things, distorted thinking and perception, hallucinations, paranoia, anxiety, depression, and/or a permanent decrease in IQ with prolonged use. Teens who use marijuana are more likely to experience school failure, which can lead to school dropout. Adolescents addicted to marijuana often struggle with new mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and paranoia. Marijuana addiction can also make existing mental health conditions worse. When addicted to marijuana, adolescents often lack motivation and energy, and lose interest in activities they used to enjoy. Changes in behavior, such as carelessness with grooming, mood changes, and relationship problems with family members and friends can indicate marijuana use. In addition, changes in grades, skipping school, lost interest in favorite activities, and changes in eating or sleeping habits could all be related to drug use. According to the CDC, marijuana use has been linked to a range of mental health problems, such as depression and social anxiety. People who use marijuana are more likely to develop temporary psychosis (not knowing what is real) which can lead to hallucinations, paranoia, and long-lasting mental disorders, including schizophrenia, depression, and borderline personality disorder.

Approximately 3 in 10 people who use marijuana have marijuana use disorder. Some signs and symptoms of marijuana use disorder include trying but failing to quit using marijuana or giving up important activities with friends and family in favor of using marijuana. The risk of developing marijuana use disorder is stronger in people who start using marijuana during youth or adolescence and who use marijuana more frequently. Marijuana is the most common drug used by children 12-17 years old who visit hospital emergency rooms for drug misuse or abuse. While there are no records of death directly from marijuana overdose, serious health problems occur when potent marijuana products are eaten or inhaled. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, there are adverse effects associated with marijuana use in any form, though additional research is needed to understand how the use of concentrate may differ from smoking dried marijuana buds.

Whether planning to discuss marijuana or other substance use, the following are keys to setting the stage for an effective conversation:

- **Keep an open mind.** When a teen feels judged or condemned, they will be less receptive to the message. It's important to project objectivity and openness. Discuss the difference between legal and illegal use of marijuana. Using marijuana prescribed for medical reasons is legal, but recreational use of marijuana is illegal for youth under 21.
- **Establish a clear family position on drug use.**
- **Maintain a positive attitude.** Approaching the situation with shame, anger or scare tactics will be counter-productive. Being respectful and understanding during the conversation will build constructive dialogue and lecturing will most likely lead to shutting down, tuning out, anger or worse. Recognizing that teens are being exposed to drugs and having open discussions about the risks can prevent substance use.
- **Be prepared.** Teens may have a lot of incorrect information they got from other kids and from the media. Teens may see a lot of information about marijuana, including edibles as being legal. They will see advertisements in the media and in stores. It's okay to not have all of the answers to their questions, but it's important to provide the teen with the correct information. If someone in the family uses marijuana for medical reasons, helping the teen to understand how that use is different from recreational use can also prevent abuse of the substance.

Drug use is lower among kids who learn about the risks at home. The number one risk kids associate with drug use is “My parents would feel really bad if they found out I was using drugs.” For some, drug use begins as a means of coping with anxiety, anger, depression, or boredom. But, in fact, being high can be a way of simply avoiding the problems and challenges of growing up. Parents, grandparents, and older siblings are models that children follow, and research suggests that family members' use of alcohol and drugs plays a strong role in whether a young person starts using drugs. Indeed, all aspects of a teen's environment—home, school, and community—can influence if he or she will try drugs. There is no quick or simple solution for preventing teen drug use. But research shows parents/guardians have a big influence on their teens, even when it doesn't seem that way.

What teens can do...

- Learn the facts about marijuana use so that they can make informed decisions.
- Share the information learned with friends, parents/guardians, teachers, and others.
- Choose not to drive if someone is planning to use or has used marijuana.
- Seek help from a parent or trusted adult if they feel pressured or endangered by someone using marijuana.

What parents/guardians can do...

- Talk with their children about the risks of using marijuana and if comfortable, ask if they have used.
- Educate themselves on the lasting effects marijuana can have on their child's brain development.
- Help their child to find the right words to refuse drug offers and suggest an alternative to using drugs
- Let their child know that it is okay to walk away from someone, including a friend, who is offering drugs and, if needed, to call someone for a ride home.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)
Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality

Seattle Children's Hospital

Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities

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