

Facts about Marijuana

Marijuana is a drug. Made from the dried and crushed leaves and flowers of the plant *Cannabis sativa*, marijuana is a combination of mind-altering ingredients called cannabinoids. The amount of THC, the chief active ingredient in marijuana, determines how strong its effects will be. Today's marijuana is as much as 10 times stronger than the marijuana used in early 1970's.

Marijuana affects brain cells. Cannabinoids remain in the fat cells of the bodies of marijuana users. Since one-third of the brain is fat, cannabinoids are stored in the brain. Marijuana can hinder learning by impairing thinking, reading comprehension and verbal and math skills. It can impair or reduce short-term memory, alter sense of time, and reduce concentration. Breakdown products from THC have been detected in fat tissues for up to one month.

Marijuana weakens your immune system. Marijuana use reduces white cell production, which lowers the body's ability to fight infection and disease. Heavy cannabis users have higher rates of illness such as flu, colds, and infections.

Marijuana accumulates in your body. THC can remain in the tissues of the body for days or weeks. Frequent users may never be rid of the drug, and the long-term health effects of this accumulation are unknown.

Marijuana harms your heart and lungs. Marijuana smoke contains more cancer-causing agents than tobacco smoke. Researchers report that marijuana cigarettes release five times as much carbon monoxide into the bloodstream and three times as much tar into the lungs of smokers as tobacco cigarettes. Marijuana speeds up the user's heart rate as much as 50%. It causes chest pains in people who have a poor blood supply to the heart.

Marijuana affects reproduction. In females, changes in brain signals caused by THC may affect ovulation and decrease fertility. In males, even one marijuana cigarette can cause a temporary drop in male hormone production. Human and animal studies show that marijuana smoking can cause incomplete genetic information to be transmitted to offspring. The chemicals in marijuana can be toxic to an unborn baby, affecting its development and growth.

Marijuana affects the family. When a person becomes dependent on marijuana, they become isolated from the rest of the family. But the rest of the family becomes isolated, too, when they try to avoid the fear, anger, suspicion, or guilt that they feel about the dependence of the family member. Out of love, and without knowing what they are doing, they may "enable" the user to continue in his or her dependence. They may make excuses, change family plans, take over the user's responsibilities, and, in general, keep the user from the consequences of his or her marijuana use. Dependence on any drug is a "family disease."

Marijuana affects the workplace: frequent absenteeism, erratic job performance, errors in judgment, inability to remember details, decline in job productivity, trouble concentrating, inability to think clearly, inattention to safety rules, needless risks, slower reaction time, frequent accidents.

Marijuana affects school performance. Frequent use of any drug during a time of rapid physical growth is a health concern. Marijuana affects reasoning and judgment, using this drug affects the student's opportunity to learn, to feel, to develop relationships, and to discover who he or she is.

Students who use marijuana have: low energy, lack of ambition, lack of interest in school activities, short-term memory (kids may be labeled "slow learners" when in fact their memory is affected by the drug), and low achievement.

People who are dependent on marijuana can get help. Family members, friends, and co-workers who care can provide support. Professional evaluation and treatment is necessary.

If you or a family member is experiencing a mental health or an alcohol or other drug-related emergency, seek immediate assistance by calling the 24-hour Suicide Prevention, Mental Health Crisis, Information and Referral Hotline: (216) 623-6888 or the United Way's First Call for Help, 211 or (216) 436-2000.