



# The Real Risks of Marijuana

**More and more states have made it legal for adults to use marijuana—but this drug still poses serious dangers for teens.**

**A**S OF 2019, 11 STATES and the District of Columbia have passed laws that legalize the recreational use of marijuana for adults. These new laws may make you think that the drug is safe. But marijuana poses very real risks—especially to teens.

Marijuana contains a chemical compound called THC (delta-9-

tetrahydrocannabinol). Like other drugs, THC changes the way the brain functions by altering communication between nerve cells, or neurons. The presence of THC in the brain can impact coordination and reaction time—making it dangerous to drive, ride a bike, or play sports.

THC use is also associated with

problems with attention, memory, learning, and decision-making. These effects can last for days or weeks, which may depend on how often someone uses marijuana.

Another danger: Marijuana is far more potent than it used to be. The average amount of THC in marijuana today is more than triple the amount found in marijuana 30 years ago. Inhaling or ingesting too much THC can land you in the emergency room with severe symptoms like increased heart rate, extreme shaking, and hallucinations.

## Teens at Risk

Your teen brain is still developing, and won't be fully formed until your mid-20s. Everything you do during this critical time can affect your brain. Learning a new skill, such as playing the guitar, can strengthen connections between your brain's neurons that help hand-eye coordination. But using

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drugs—including marijuana—can negatively impact your brain development. The brain changes that lead to memory and learning problems may become permanent and last through adulthood.

Since the teen brain is still

developing, adolescents have a higher risk of developing an addiction than adults. THC causes the brain to release the chemical dopamine, which is connected to the development of cravings and addiction. Studies show that people who begin using marijuana recreationally before age 18 are four to seven times more likely to develop what is called *marijuana use disorder*. The most severe forms of this disorder are considered *addiction*, a disease where the user has a hard time quitting, even if they experience negative consequences from their drug use.

Bottom line: It doesn't matter what the state laws are for adults. Marijuana is dangerous (not to mention illegal) for teenagers.

## What's Up With CBD Products?

Many products today promote the health benefits of the chemicals in cannabis (another name for marijuana). For example, so-called **CBD** products contain a chemical compound called **cannabidiol**. Unlike THC, CBD does not have mind-altering effects on the brain. Over-the-counter CBD products claim to treat conditions such as chronic pain, insomnia, and anxiety. But these products are not regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). This means they haven't gone through rigorous testing to make sure they are safe and effective and contain exactly what their labels claim. For example, some have been shown to contain THC. Research also shows CBD may interact with other medications—with potentially harmful results. That's why it's critical to talk to a doctor before taking any CBD product.



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