

References

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Department of Mental Health
Lifting Life's Possibilities

Facts and Questions About Marijuana



Alabama SBIRT

Alabama Department of Mental Health
Substance Abuse Services Division
100 North Union Street, Suite 430
P.O. Box 301410
Montgomery, AL 36130-1410
Tel: 334-242-3961
www.nh.alabama.gov

Marijuana

What Is It?

Marijuana is a mixture of the fried and shredded leaves, stems, seeds, and flowers of the hemp plant. The mixture can be green, brown, or gray. Hemp's scientific name is *Cannabis sativa*.

A bunch of leaves seems harmless, right? But think again. Marijuana has a chemical in it called tetrahydrocannabinol. Better known as THC. A lot of other chemicals are found in marijuana too—about 400 of them, some of which can cause lung cancer. But THC is the main active ingredient.¹

What Are the Common Street Names?

There are more than 200 slang terms for marijuana including:

- Pot
- Herb
- Weed
- Boom
- Mary Jane
- Gangster
- Chronic
- Bud
- Sinsemilla, ganja, hashish and hash oil (stronger forms of marijuana).

How Is It Used?

Marijuana is used in many ways. Some users brew it as tea or mix it with food. Others smoke blunts—cigars hollowed out and filled with the drug. And sometimes marijuana is smoked through a water pipe called a bong. The most common method is smoking loose marijuana rolled into a cigarette called a joint or nail.²

Short-term Effects of Using Marijuana

- Memory Problems
- Impaired Coordination
- Distortions in senses of sight, hearing, touch, time and depth.

Long-term Effects of Using Marijuana

- Increasing tolerance—The need for increasing amounts to feel effects.
- Permanent damage to thinking and reasoning ability.
- Chronic bronchitis, frequent chest colds, and pneumonia.
- Increased risk of lung or oral cancer.
- Weakened immune system.
- Damage to the reproductive system and infertility in both sexes.
- Miscarriage or brain damage to fetuses.

Addiction

Here's the thing: Once dopamine starts flowing, a user feels the urge to smoke marijuana again, and then again, and then again. Repeated use could lead to addiction, and addiction is a brain disease.

Smoking Marijuana Can Make Driving Dangerous

The cerebellum is the section of our brain that does most of the work on balance and coordination. When THC finds its way into the cerebellum, it makes scoring a goal in soccer or hitting a homerun pretty tough.

THC also does a number on the basal ganglia, another part of the brain that's involved in movement control.

These THC effects can spell disaster on the highway. Research shows that drivers on marijuana have slow reaction times, impaired judgment, and problems responding to signals and sounds on the road. In one study of 150 reckless drivers, 33 tested positive for marijuana.^{1,4}

Smoking Marijuana May Lead to Lung Cancer

The list of negative effects goes on and on. Smoking marijuana may increase the risk of heart attack. Smoking marijuana may cause lung cancer—causing substances as tobacco. Plus, marijuana smokers tend to inhale more deeply and hold their breath longer than cigarette smokers do. So more smoke enters the lungs. Puff for puff, smoking marijuana may increase the risk of cancer even more than smoking cigarettes does.⁴

What About Medical Marijuana?

THC, the main active ingredient in marijuana, produces effects that potentially can be useful for treating a variety of medical conditions. It is the main ingredient in a pill that is currently used to treat nausea in cancer. It is the main ingredient in a pill that is currently used to treat nausea in cancer chemotherapy patients and to stimulate appetite in patients with wasting due to AIDS. Scientists are continuing to investigate other potential medical uses for cannabinoids.

However, smoking marijuana is difficult to justify medically because the amount of THC in marijuana is not always consistent. It would be difficult if not impossible—to come up with a safe and effective use of the drug because you could never be sure how much THC you were getting. Moreover, the negative effects of marijuana smoke on the lungs will offset the helpfulness of smoked marijuana for some patients.