

MARIJUANA FACTS: BREAKING DOWN THE MYTHS



Marijuana use among teens had been on the decline since the mid-1990s—until now. According to the 2010 *Monitoring the Future* survey, teen marijuana use is no longer declining; in some cases, it is even increasing, particularly among eighth graders, the youngest group studied.

Why? One possibility is that some teens don't see marijuana as harmful . . . or at least *that* harmful. In fact, that same survey shows that in recent years, fewer teens think using marijuana regularly is risky at all.

Why are more teens so convinced that using marijuana isn't harmful? The answer to this question may be right in front of you—on your music player, your cell phone, your computer, or your TV. In fact, the myth that marijuana is no big deal is nearly everywhere.

"The messages getting to young people are very mixed and probably contributing to the misperception that marijuana isn't dangerous or harmful," says Dr. Susan Weiss, a scientist at the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). "We are concerned about this because we know that as teens' perception of risk goes down, their use goes up."

To make smart decisions about marijuana use and your health, you need to know essential facts about the effects of marijuana.

**SCIENTIFIC
FACT**

**Marijuana
is addictive.**

The main active ingredient in marijuana, THC (delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol), stimulates brain cells to release the chemical dopamine, which creates a feeling of pleasure. This effect is partly responsible for the "high" a person feels when he or she smokes marijuana. It is one of the main reasons people use marijuana again and again, which can lead to addiction.

You may be surprised to know that 1 in 11 adults who use marijuana become addicted. And the younger someone starts smoking, the higher the risk. One in six people who start in their teens will become addicted.

SCIENTIFIC FACT

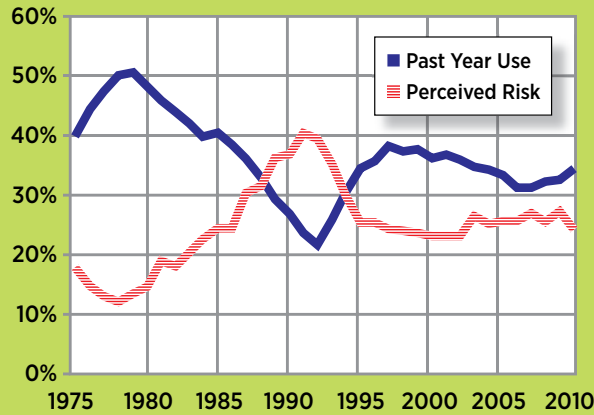
Marijuana use can negatively affect your performance in school and athletics.

THC affects a part of the brain called the hippocampus, which is critical for processing and storing new information, making it difficult to learn. THC also affects attention, impairing your ability to do complex tasks that require focus and concentration. These effects can last even after the high is long gone, especially for frequent users of marijuana, and that can make it harder for them to do well in school.

In fact, research has shown that compared with those who don't smoke marijuana, students who do are more likely to drop out.

What about sports? THC also affects parts of the brain that control timing,

Percentage of U.S. 12th-Grade Students Reporting Marijuana Use vs. Perceived Risk of Marijuana Use



This graph shows that when more teens perceive marijuana use to be risky, marijuana use among teens decreases. When more teens believe marijuana use is *not* harmful, use of the drug increases.

Source: University of Michigan, 2010 *Monitoring the Future Study*

movement, and coordination. This not only diminishes athletic performance, but also puts you at risk for serious injury. Using marijuana can lead to other serious problems, especially for the lungs. Chronic marijuana users develop coughs, excess phlegm, and bronchitis because of the toxic mix of gases and particles in marijuana smoke.

SMOKING MARIJUANA CAN HURT YOUR ABILITY TO . . .

- concentrate
- remember what you learned
- focus on projects or tasks
- react quickly while driving
- perform in sports owing to effects on coordination

Marijuana Facts: Now You Know

Q: Why do people say that marijuana is a "gateway" drug?

—Student, McCreary Academy, Kentucky

A: Most people who use other "harder" drugs used marijuana first, but not everyone who uses marijuana will go on to use other drugs. One reason may be that marijuana tends to be more available to teens, so it's often one of the first drugs they try. It may then put teens in contact with others who use drugs, perhaps increasing the availability of other drugs. But "gateway" drug or not, marijuana has its own risks.

—David Shurtleff, Acting Deputy Director, NIDA

SCIENTIFIC FACT

Driving under the influence of marijuana is dangerous.

The skills you need to drive safely—alertness, concentration, coordination, judgment, and reaction time—are controlled by the parts of your brain affected by THC. This means that smoking marijuana seriously increases the likelihood of a car accident.

Some people think they can compensate for the effects of marijuana by driving

more slowly or paying closer attention to the road. But that does not work, especially when combined with even a small amount of alcohol.

In fact, marijuana (sometimes in combination with other drugs and alcohol) is the most common illegal drug found in the systems of drivers who die in car accidents (up to 14 percent). Bottom line: It's not safe to drive after smoking marijuana or to ride with a driver who has been smoking marijuana.

Important Resources

- For immediate help with a crisis, call **1-800-273-TALK**.
- To locate a treatment center, call **1-800-662-HELP** or visit <http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>.

For more information on drugs, go to <http://teens.drugabuse.gov> or www.scholastic.com/headsup.

Marijuana leaf illustration: © iStockphoto.