

Thinking through recreational marijuana use



Is marijuana legalized where you live? Make an educated and informed decision about recreational marijuana use – for you, your family, and those you care about.

- 1 Lawful is not the same as healthful**
Simply because something is legal does not mean it is good for your health. There are lots (and lots!) of foods, drinks, and activities that, although technically legal, may not be the best for you. And some legal things may actually be harmful to you depending on how often and why you use them.
- 2 Marijuana is not the same as alcohol**
Although some similarities between marijuana and alcohol exist, some very clear differences do as well. Here are two important ones.
 - Likelihood of Intoxication**
With alcohol, you can have a drink and not get drunk. With marijuana, even a little use and you are mostly high. Why? Because a much lower dosage of marijuana is needed to induce a state of intoxication - even as little as four puffs of a marijuana cigarette.
 - Knowing what you are ingesting**
Unlike alcohol concentrations (which are labeled on every bottle), cannabis-based products contain vast differences in potency, other cannabinoids and chemical constituents, route of administration, and so on. All these differences can lead to a lot of uncertainty about the subjective effects you will experience, both in terms of the onset and intensity.
- 3 Motivation matters**
One common reason people use recreational marijuana is to help disconnect and avoid thinking about daily stressors and pressures. In this way, marijuana use can function as a short-term fix but may fail to address underlying issues. Strive for coping strategies that connect, rather than disconnect, you from meaningful people, activities, and other aspects of your life. Talking with a counselor or mental health professional about effective coping strategies may be helpful as well.
- 4 Effects of marijuana will be different for different people**
Here is where the alcohol analogy may be helpful. Some people can have a drink and be fine. For others, a drink isn't just a drink...it's a step down what could become a very dangerous path.
The same can be true for marijuana – a puff isn't just a puff, depending on who you are. Do you have a history with substance misuse or psychiatric illnesses? People in your life to let you know if any use becomes problematic? What is fine for one person may not be fine for you, and that's okay.

Whether you puff or pass is ultimately your decision. But think wisely about whatever decision you make and encourage those you love to do so as well.

Thinking through recreational marijuana use



5 Marijuana and Addiction

Whether or not marijuana causes fundamental changes in the body leading to physical dependence remains debated. Regardless of this debate, individuals can be addicted to many things that do not have the physiological altering effects of something like nicotine.

The hallmark sign of an addiction is compulsive use despite adverse effects – losing control, inability to stop, needing to consume more to get the same effect. When we think in these terms, it is not surprising that prolonged marijuana use may lead individuals to develop all the classical behaviors of someone who has an addiction.

6 Not all marijuana – and marijuana products – are created equally

Marijuana is becoming more potent. The amount of THC (the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana) has steadily increased in recent decades, meaning that even smaller amounts are needed for intoxication. In addition, different methods of marijuana ingestion are associated with substantially different amounts of THC entering the bloodstream.

7 Marijuana and the developing brain

Drugs, including marijuana, have well-documented negative effects on the neural connections in the brain. These connections are being formed, strengthened, and pruned throughout the teenage years and into the early 20's. This is the reason all cannabis statutes at the state level restrict use to adults over the age of 21. Marijuana use impairs attention, memory, learning and decision-making in the short-term, and over time appears to be linked with lower cognitive functioning.

8 Effects on others

Any decision to use (or not use) marijuana is not just about you, as it will affect those around you in ways beyond exposure to second hand smoke. For instance, how would recreational marijuana use affect your parenting, your relationships with friends and family, and your ability to get a job and perform your work?

This piece is focused on recreational marijuana use. For medicinal marijuana use, please contact your health professional (though checking with your professional before starting *any* use is also recommended).

Author

[Dr. Allen Barton](#), Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist,
Department of Human Development & Family Studies, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

united.illinois.edu

Additional Resources

[Commonly Asked Questions about Marijuana](#) | cdc.gov/marijuana/faqs.htm

[NIH Marijuana Research Report](#) | bit.ly/3Ee0QAp

