

Marijuana – A User's Guide to Stopping

This guide was written by David Barrett and Janet Shafer under the auspices of the Center for Addiction and Behavioral Health Research (CABHR).

What is Cannabis?

- Cannabis is a general name given to a variety of preparations made from the plant cannabis sativa.
- Cannabis has three common forms for consumption: marijuana, hashish and hash oil.
- Cannabis has some practical uses such as the manufacture of rope or clothing from the fibers.
- Cannabis has some promise as a medicine in the treatment of glaucoma and the nausea associated with chemotherapy.
- It is estimated that over 70 million Americans over 12 years of age have tried marijuana.
- Approximately 5 million American adults are regular users of marijuana.

What are the active ingredients of marijuana?

- The ingredient that has psychoactive (mind altering) qualities is THC (Delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol).
- In addition to THC, there are over 400 other chemicals in the plant. In order to make it "heavier" it is often "cut" with formaldehyde or other toxic chemicals.
- The strains of marijuana available today have been cultivated for much higher concentrations of THC than those strains available in the 1960's and 1970's. Some concentrations are now 7.5 to 24 percent.
- Hashish can have a potency ranging 5 to 10 times higher.
- Hash oil is produced through extraction and can have a potency of up to 50%.
- The concentration of the drug THC determines the drug's harm potential as an addictive substance.

How long is marijuana in my system?

When marijuana is smoked, THC rapidly enters the blood stream and is absorbed by most tissues and organs in your body. As your body attempts to rid itself of the chemicals in the marijuana, it transforms the THC into metabolites. Biological tests can detect THC metabolites for days, weeks or even months after the last time you smoked marijuana.

What are the immediate affects of smoking marijuana?

Marijuana has an immediate affect on your **lungs, heart and brain**. Marijuana causes a number of physical changes such as red eyes, rapid pulse, dry mouth and throat, and diminished reflexes and motor skills.

The most common ***pleasant*** psychological effects:

- Relaxation
- Altered sense of time
- Loss of inhibition
- Free-flowing and disconnected thoughts

Some people believe that their sense of taste, hearing, vision and touch are increased while under the influence of the drug. However, this has not been shown in research. Some people use marijuana to increase their creativity, but this too is just a perception and is not supported by any facts.

There can also be some immediate ***unpleasant*** psychological effects:

- Panic attacks
- Paranoia
- Poor judgment
- Loss of coordination
- Memory problems

People who smoke marijuana do it because they enjoy the pleasant psychological effects. Long-term regular users of marijuana develop ***tolerance*** to the drug. This means they need more of the drug to get the same pleasant effect, and are more likely to feel the negative effects. Contrary to some points of view, it is possible to become addicted to marijuana and to depend on the drug to get through the day.

Self-Test #1

Are any of these statements true for you?

Last Name, First Name

Yes No

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have to smoke quite a bit more (25-50% more) before I feel the effects I want. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | The "quality" of the high I get from marijuana has changed, but I use anyway. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I use marijuana in order to cope with some situations. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I feel a strong urge to smoke marijuana at a certain time each day. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I have a hard time going a day or two without smoking marijuana. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | I always keep a supply of marijuana on hand. |

If you answered "Yes" to one or more of these questions, you show signs of psychological dependence.

What are the health risks of using marijuana?

Respiratory system:

- Lung diseases like emphysema and bronchitis
- Cancers of the lungs, throat and larynx

Scientists believe that marijuana can be especially harmful to your lungs because you inhale unfiltered smoke deeply and hold it in your lungs as long as possible. The smoke, which contains more cancer-causing agents than tobacco smoke, is in contact with your lung tissue for long periods of time. It is likely that marijuana may increase the risk of cancer, especially if you use along with alcohol, tobacco, and other substances that are toxic to human organs.

Cardiovascular system

Marijuana use increases your heart rate as much as 50%, depending on the potency of the THC and the amount you smoke. It can cause chest pain in people who have a poor blood supply to the heart – and it produces these effects more rapidly than tobacco smoke does.

Reproductive system

Research studies show that the use of marijuana affects hormone levels in men and women. This can disrupt sperm production for men and ovulation for women and result in temporary loss of fertility. It has also been shown that marijuana can diminish or extinguish sexual pleasure. If you use marijuana during pregnancy, the result may be a premature birth and low birth weight. Marijuana use may be especially harmful during adolescence, a period of rapid physical and sexual development.

Immune system

Marijuana causes a variety of changes to cell structure. There is evidence that it suppresses parts of the immune system, decreasing resistance to bacterial and viral infection.

Central nervous system

It has recently been discovered that THC attaches to receptors in the brain. Some areas of the brain have more THC receptors than others. This means that they are more affected by marijuana. When THC attaches to the receptors in the hippocampus, it weakens short-term memory and blocks learning by interfering with the transfer of information into long-term memory. Marijuana also influences emotions by acting in a similar way in the limbic system of the brain.

Self-Test #2

Have you experienced any of these effects? _____

Last Name, First Name

Yes

No

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Chronic coughing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Frequent colds, bronchitis, or other upper-respiratory infections |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Trouble concentrating or remembering routine information |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Lack of motivation at school or work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Changes in your sexual activity or sexual functioning |

If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions, your physical health may be affected by your marijuana use.

How does marijuana use affect work?

Marijuana use has been linked to increased accidents, absenteeism, and lowered productivity. One large series of studies found that marijuana users:

- Are less committed to their jobs and have higher job turnover.
- Have lower job satisfaction.
- Have more absenteeism and tardiness.
- Have more on-the-job accidents.
- Have higher worker’s compensation claims.
- Are more likely to report to work intoxicated or with a hangover.
- Are more likely to use drugs on the job.

As a result, many employers require a pre-employment drug screen. A positive test may disqualify you for the job. Should your job be regulated by the government, e.g., the Department of Transportation if you have a commercial driver’s license, or the Federal Aviation Administration, or if you are in a “safety sensitive position”, you will also be subject to random urine drug screens, and “for cause” testing under guidelines set by your employer. Should you test “positive” under any of these conditions, your employer has the right to terminate your employment immediately. In these circumstances, you would not be eligible for unemployment benefits.

What are the legal aspects of marijuana use?

Possession of marijuana continues to be against the law in most states and can lead to arrest, fines or imprisonment.

Penalties for possession of marijuana vary from state to state. Smaller amounts may result in misdemeanor charges. Larger quantities are treated as a felony offense with much more severe fines and penalties.

Possession of smaller amounts:

Up to 6 months in jail and up to \$1000 in fines.

Possession with intent to deliver:

Up to 15 years in prison and up to \$25,000 in fines.

Marijuana resents a definite danger on the road.

Driving experiments show that marijuana affects a wide range of skills needed for safe driving. Thinking and reflexes are slowed, making it hard for drivers to respond to sudden, unexpected events. Also, a driver's ability to "track" (stay in lane) through curves, to brake quickly and to maintain speed and the proper distance between cars is affected. Research shows that these skills are impaired for at least 4 to 6 hours after smoking a single marijuana cigarette; long after the "high" is gone. If a person combines marijuana with alcohol, the risk of an accident greatly increases.

What things increase my risk?

A number of factors increase the likelihood that you will experience problems from marijuana:

- Using marijuana when you are driving, operating machinery, or other equipment.
- Using marijuana to deal with stress or strong emotions such as anger.
- Using marijuana in combination with alcohol or other drugs.
- Using marijuana on a regular basis.
- Limiting your friends or acquaintances to other marijuana users.

What can I do to reduce my risk?

The only way to completely eliminate the risks of using marijuana is to abstain. As with any drug or substance, there is a direct relationship with marijuana between **DOSE** and **RISK**. The less you dose the lower your risk.

Self-Test # 3

What problems is marijuana causing me? _____

Last Name, First Name

Yes No

- | | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Am I fighting/arguing with my family? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Am I avoiding my responsibilities as a spouse or partner, a parent, an employee? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Have my friends expressed concern or withdrawn from me? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Is my job at risk? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Am I spending too much money on marijuana? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | Have I lost motivation to get things done in my life? |

If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions, then marijuana is a problem for you, and it’s time to make a change.

What is my next step?

Make a plan.

This is an important step you are taking. This pamphlet should help you figure out what **YOU** need to do to succeed. Develop a plan that is specific to you and your life.

- Choose a date on which you will stop.
- Make a list of the reasons why you want to change.
- Tell people that are most likely to support you.
- Don’t get discouraged if you don’t have instant success.
- Adjust your plan if you are not successful.

Self-help strategies

1. **Get rid of your supply of marijuana.** A big mistake that people make is keeping a supply of marijuana on hand. Get rid of all your drugs and drug “paraphernalia” (pipes, rolling papers, bongs, scales, posters, etc.). These will remind you of getting high, and it will be harder to resist an urge if you have marijuana available.
2. **Pay attention to when you feel the urge to use.** Certain situations, people, feelings, or even the time of day can “trigger” an urge to get high. These triggers will vary from person to person. It is important that you know what **YOUR** triggers are! Look at the following for some examples of common triggers.

Internal triggers:

- Negative moods like anger, depression, anxiety, or boredom
- The belief that you need marijuana to cope with your problems
- Certain times of day when your “routine” is to get high (i.e. after work, before sleep, etc)
- Conflict with spouses, children or people at work

External triggers:

- The smell of marijuana
- Seeing other people use marijuana
- Seeing someone who is high and seems to be having a great time
- Parties, celebrations, or events that involve marijuana
- Pressure to get high from other users

NOTE: Most people can handle any one of these “triggers”. It is most difficult when you encounter two or more triggers at one time. This increases the risk that you will make a sudden decision to use without thinking about the consequences or what you will need to do to cope with the situation.

- 3. Learn how to say no.** You have to learn to say “no” to yourself and to other people. Other people do not make you use, but they can make it pretty hard on you to continue to say “no”.

***Remember-** some people are accustomed to seeing you using. They may not understand what you are trying to change. They may even feel uncomfortable with you not using.*

- 4. Watch it at home.** Living with another person who uses marijuana is a special problem. Ask that person not to use when you are around. That may help, but you are still likely to be exposed to situations where you see or smell marijuana or know that people are getting high. Be prepared to leave the house if your urge to use gets too strong. If you are unable to make your home “drug free”, you may have to change your living arrangements.
- 5. Get support.** Make a list of the people in your life who care about you and support your efforts. These may include family, friends, ministers, co-workers, or health professionals. Talk to them about how you are doing. Do not hold back “bad news” if things aren’t going well. Most people who succeed have support from a number of people.
- 6. Stay busy.** Fill your free time with a hobby, activity or exercise program. Spend time with family or friends. Loneliness and boredom may cause you to miss getting high. Find something or someone meaningful to replace using.
- 7. Don’t get discouraged by life problems.** Problems don’t disappear simply because you aren’t using. Sometimes problems get worse after you have taken a positive step. Recognize that everyday stress can trigger thoughts about getting high. You are faced with problems in your life without the option of getting high to “forget” or avoid your feelings. Give yourself time to learn to cope with life without marijuana.

How can treatment help?

Treatment helps you sort out problems, develop plans to solve them, and learn new skills. Call for help if you are uncertain if you can succeed on your own.

Where to go for help

- Your Employee Assistance Program (800-236-3231)
- Your primary care physician
- Treatment provider
- 12-STEP programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or Cocaine Anonymous, (414) 771-9119 (Milwaukee)
- Your local Council on Alcohol or Drug Abuse/Impact, (414) 256-4804 (Milwaukee)

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