

Increase Your Awareness: Teen Marijuana Use

Marijuana is often one of the main drugs of choice among teens and adolescents. With the legalization of marijuana in several states, our youth have received mixed messages from society that has led to misconceptions over the harm that marijuana has on developing adolescents. While marijuana is not legal in any state for adolescent use, the changes in legislation across our country has created an environment in which marijuana increasingly is seen as acceptable, safe, and therapeutic (American Academy of Pediatrics). Perception data tells us that that the number of young people who believe marijuana use is risky is decreasing (Nebraska Risk and Protective Factor Student Survey).

Marijuana today is much stronger than it was in the past. THC is the psychoactive substance in marijuana. In the early 1990's, the average amount of THC in marijuana was less than 4%; today it averages 15-20%. Not only is marijuana more potent, it is also being used in new ways with the intent to get a stronger and longer lasting high. For example, concentrated marijuana can be up to four times stronger in THC content than the plant itself. Marijuana concentrates are increasingly being used in vaping devices. According to the 2019 Monitoring the Future Survey, more than one fifth of high school seniors reported having vaped marijuana in the past year, as did nearly that same proportion of 10th graders (National Institute on Drug Abuse: NIDA). Users prefer the vaping device because it is smokeless, the vapor produced dissipates quickly, it is sometimes odorless, and it is easy to hide or conceal. Just like nicotine vaping devices, marijuana vapes work by heating a liquid or oil that becomes a vapor the user inhales. While marijuana vaping devices often resemble devices used for nicotine or other e-liquids, the appearance of the liquid in the device looks different. In a vape cartridge, THC is thicker and appears more like oil, whereas nicotine appears more like water. THC may not appear to move in the cartridge as freely as nicotine e-liquid.

The rise in THC levels can increase the negative effects of using marijuana, especially for young people. When marijuana use begins in the teen years, it can have a significant impact on brain development. THC alters the ability of the hippocampus (a brain area related to learning and memory), to communicate effectively with other brain regions. This can lead to:

- Reduced ability to concentrate
- Impaired or reduced short & long-term memory
- Impaired or reduced comprehension
- Impairments in learning, memory, perception and judgement

Compared to those who don't use marijuana, those who use heavily more often report:

- Lower life satisfaction
- Poorer mental health
- Poorer physical health
- More relationship problems

Research also shows that teens who use marijuana are twice as likely as adults to become addicted to it. In fact, the majority of adolescents who enter drug rehab do so for marijuana abuse.

The physical and psychological signs of marijuana use are the same as the side effects the user will experience. Most often, these effects are temporary and may only last for a few hours. For this reason, parents may not have an opportunity to notice the physical side effects of marijuana use when teens use marijuana away from home. Side effects can range in severity and may include:

- Red eyes
- Dry mouth and thirst
- Increased appetite
- Shifts in behavior and mood
- Increased blood pressure
- Delayed reaction time (both physically and mentally)
- Forgetfulness
- Appearing intoxicated
- Nausea or vomiting
- Panic or anxiety
- Hallucinations or delusions (when taken in high doses)

The behavioral signs of marijuana abuse may offer more insight to the existence of a problem. Behavioral signs may include:

- Using new words and phrases like "sparking up," "420," "dabbing," and "shatter"
- Losing interest in and motivation to do usual activities
- A noticeable change in friends and/or spending time with peers that use marijuana
- Possessing marijuana paraphernalia such as pipes, lighters, vape pens, or rolling papers
- Stealing money or having money that cannot be accounted for
- Changes in Appearance
- Diminished performance in school, at work, and/or in meeting responsibilities at home

Together, parents, schools and the community play an important role in preventing drug use amongst youth. The earlier we start talking to our youth about the risks of substance use, the more equipped they are to develop the knowledge, attitudes and skills they need to make healthy choices. Below are some helpful talking points to help guide conversations about marijuana use.

- Marijuana is not a benign drug for teens. The teen brain is still developing, and marijuana may cause abnormal brain development.
- Marijuana use can lead to the development of marijuana use disorder, which takes the form of addiction in severe cases. One in six teenagers who use marijuana today will become addicted.
- Teens who use marijuana regularly may develop serious mental health disorders, including addiction, depression, and psychosis.
- Recreational use of marijuana by minors and young adults under the age of 21 years is illegal and, if prosecuted, may result in a permanent criminal record, affecting schooling, jobs, etc.
- Never drive under the influence of marijuana or ride in a car with a driver who is under the influence of marijuana. Adults and teens regularly get into serious and even fatal car accidents while under the influence of marijuana.

For additional information, download the free marijuana talk kit from Partnership to End Addiction:

https://drugfree.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Marijuana_Talk_Kit.pdf

References: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; American Addiction Centers; Drug Enforcement Administration; Journal of Adolescent Health; National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA); Partnership to End Addiction; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)