

Effects of Marijuana

What is Marijuana?

Marijuana (“pot”) is used by many people in the United States. It is an illegal drug in most states from a plant called cannabis. It is usually used to relax or to get “high.” A pill form can be prescribed legally for medical uses, if needed.

Effects on the Body

Marijuana can cause dry mouth, red eyes, balance problems or slowed movements. Other side effects can be memory problems, paranoid or obsessed thinking (not based on what is real), problems focusing, and mood swings.

Each person reacts differently when using “pot”. Side effects and withdrawal effects may be worse when more marijuana is used. Strong cravings and dependence or addiction can make a person irritable, anxious, and cause more sleep problems when the drug is not used.

One of the chemicals in marijuana (THC) is absorbed by smoking, going through the lungs and into the blood. It stays in the body for several days, causing health problems. Learning problems from marijuana can last even longer.

Mental Health Problems

Marijuana changes your view of reality by causing an imbalance in your brain chemicals (both the neurotransmitters that excite brain cells, and the ones that hold back brain activity). It can also change the amount of other brain chemicals that help balance your mood and can cause:

- Higher risk of having behavior known as **psychosis**.^(5, 7) that can include the feeling that people are “out to get you”, or hallucinations (like hearing voices or seeing things that other people don’t see)
- Higher risk of having **depression** and **thoughts of suicide**.⁽⁵⁾
- More **anxiety**, fear or nervous tension.⁽⁵⁾
- Less ability to pay attention or to concentrate.⁽⁷⁾
- Less ability to “make memories” or to recall what you learned before.⁽⁶⁾

Lung Problems

Smoking marijuana is very harmful to your lungs, as smoking cigarettes is.

- Smoking one marijuana joint may be as harmful as smoking 5 cigarettes.⁽⁴⁾
 - Marijuana has more tar, and are usually smoked without filters

Effects of Marijuana

- Smoking marijuana has been shown to cause: chronic coughs and bronchitis (inflamed airways), lung mucus or phlegm, shortness of breath, wheezing, and pneumonia (inflamed, infected lungs).⁽¹⁾

Drug Interactions

Marijuana is a complex drug that contains more than 60 different chemicals. Some of their effects on prescription drugs are known. Others are hard to predict:

- **Tricyclic antidepressants** (Amitriptyline, Nortriptyline) used along with marijuana may increase heart rate way too high. (100-160 beats per minute).⁽²⁾
- **Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors** (Fluoxetine (PROZAC), Sertraline (ZOLOFT)) used along with marijuana can cause mania in rare cases.⁽²⁾ with extremely active, impulsive, “up” behavior and quickly changing thoughts.
- **Antipsychotics** (Chlorpromazine, Clozapine) used with marijuana may increase the effects or decrease the effects of antipsychotics.⁽²⁾ making it harder to control your symptoms
- **Sleep aid medications** (Zolpidem (AMBIEN), Eszopiclone (LUNESTA)) used along with marijuana may cause you to be too tired to be safe.
- **Anxiety medications** (Alprazolam (Xanax), Lorazepam (Ativan) used along with marijuana may also cause too much sedation and tiredness.⁽²⁾
- **Pain relievers** (hydrocodone, oxycodone) used along with marijuana may also cause you to be too tired to function safely.⁽²⁾
- **Antihistamines** (Diphenhydramine) used along with marijuana may also cause more sedation and tiredness.⁽²⁾
- **Theophylline** used along with marijuana may have less effect, making it harder to control asthma and other heart or lung conditions.⁽²⁾

Other Effects of Marijuana

- Tremors (shaking), nausea, or headache
- Poor coordination (clumsy movements)
- Breathing problems, and higher pulse and blood pressure
- Increased appetite (more hungry)
- Harder to fight infections
- Problems thinking clearly
- Lose interest in school, work, relationships, and other activities
- Can cause legal problems, and addiction or dependence
- Driving or other activities are more dangerous with slowed reaction time

Effects of Marijuana

References

1. [Aldington S](#), [Williams M](#), et al. "Effects of cannabis on pulmonary structure, function and symptoms." *Thorax*. 12(2007): 1058-1-63.
2. Dean A. "Illicit drugs and drug interactions." *Australian Pharmacist*. 25(2006): 684-689.
3. Lopez-Morena JA, Gonzalez-Cuevas G, et al. "The pharmacology of the endocannabinoid system: functional and structural interactions with other neurotransmitter systems and their repercussions in behavioral addiction." *Addiction Biology*. 13(2008) 160-167.
4. [Moore BA](#), [Augustson EM](#), et al. "Respiratory effects of marijuana and tobacco use in a U.S. sample." *J Gen Intern Med*. 1(2005):33-37.
5. Moore T, Stanley A, et al. "Cannabis use and risk of psychotic or affective mental health outcomes: a systemic review." *Lancet* 370(2007): 319-328.
6. [Niyuhire F](#), [Varvel SA](#), et al. "Exposure to marijuana smoke impairs memory retrieval in mice." *J Pharmacol Exp Ther*. 3(2007): 1067-1075.
7. Raphael B, Wooding S, et al. "Comorbidity: cannabis and complexity." *Journal of Psychiatric Practice* 11(2005): 161-176.

Posted with permission by author, Eric Johnson, Clinical Pharmacist. Originally developed in 2009.