

Clearing the Haze: Debunking Myths and Understanding the Risks of Cannabis Use

Early cannabis use can have lasting effects, impeding brain development and leading to lifelong consequences.

The momentum toward federal legalization of marijuana has been building since California first legalized its medical use almost three decades ago. Today, recreational marijuana is permissible in 24 states and Washington, D.C., with only four states still outlawing it completely, without any medical exceptions.

President Joe Biden's call for a review of marijuana's Schedule I status—indicating a substance with no accepted medical use and high potential for abuse—in 2022 signals a potential shift in federal policy. However, amid the legalization push, it's crucial to dispel the notion that marijuana is entirely harmless or even beneficial.

As doctors and mental health professionals, our concern lies in the misconception that marijuana is innocuous, particularly among those considering its legalization. While marijuana does have some demonstrated medicinal benefits, such as alleviating symptoms of certain conditions like chemotherapy-induced nausea and chronic pain, its risks should not be underestimated.

A landmark study published in the Journal of the American Heart Association underscores some of these risks. The research indicates that marijuana use is associated with a significantly higher risk of heart attack and stroke, with daily users facing a 25% higher chance of heart attack and a 42% higher chance of stroke than non-users.

Moreover, the potency of marijuana, measured by its psychoactive component THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), has surged over the years. Today's strains contain between 17% and 28% THC, far surpassing the levels found in marijuana from previous decades. This increased potency heightens the risk of addiction, despite common misconceptions about marijuana's addictive potential.

Studies reveal that nearly 10% of people who try marijuana become addicted, with higher rates among adolescents. Adolescent use is particularly concerning, as marijuana can impede brain development and lead to long-term cognitive deficits. Frequent marijuana use in teenagers has been linked to issues such as impaired attention, memory problems, and learning difficulties.

The mental health risks associated with marijuana use are also substantial. Research indicates that teenage girls who use marijuana daily are five times more likely to develop depression or anxiety. Additionally, cannabis use disorder, affecting more than 1 in 5 users, is associated with an increased risk of developing schizophrenia.

Quitting marijuana can be challenging, with withdrawal symptoms including depression, insomnia, and intense cravings. In light of these risks, it's essential to reconsider the belief that marijuana is a harmless

substance.

As societal acceptance and access to Cannabis continue to expand, it's crucial to acknowledge and address its potential health consequences. Rather than endorsing blanket legalization, we must prioritize informed decision-making and public education about the risks associated with marijuana use.

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