

# Athletes may have different reasons for marijuana use

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College athletes tend to be less likely than their non-athlete peers to smoke marijuana. But when they do, they may have some different reasons for it, according to a study in the July issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Past studies have shown that athletes generally smoke marijuana less often than other [college students](#) do.

"But there is still a pretty large number who choose to use it," said Jennifer F. Buckman, Ph.D., of the Center of Alcohol Studies at Rutgers University in Piscataway, New Jersey.

Because marijuana could have ill health effects—and possibly hurt athletic performance—that begs the question of why college athletes would use it, according to Buckman.

So for the new study, she and her colleagues surveyed 392 college athletes and 504 non-athlete students about marijuana use. Among men, one-third of athletes said they'd used the [drug](#) in the past year, versus half of non-athletes; the same was true of 25% of female athletes and 48% of non-athletes.

Overall, athletes and non-athletes shared many of the same risk factors for marijuana use such as being white, being a cigarette smoker and having an exaggerated perception of how many of their [peers](#) use the drug. But there were some differences too.

"One thing that stood out is that athletes were more likely to use marijuana because they thought it was pleasurable," Buckman said.

They were less likely, on the other hand, to use the drug for reasons like dealing with stress. That suggests that athletes largely smoke marijuana recreationally, rather than as a way of coping with life problems.

The exception, though, might be male athletes who keep using marijuana during their competitive season. The study found that these athletes reported more problems with anxiety and negative mood, and appeared more likely to use the drug for coping with stress compared with the male athletes who avoided marijuana during their competitive season.

"That's a really interesting finding, and it's a direction for research to go in the future," Buckman said. "What are the stressors for these athletes? Is it academic? Is it the athletic competition?"

The ultimate goal in studies like these, Buckman noted, is to uncover factors that seem to influence drug use, then develop specific messages most likely to make a difference with a specific group.

As an example, she pointed to the finding that female students with body-image worries were more likely to use marijuana than women without such concerns. Because the survey was done at one time point, it's not clear which came first: the marijuana use or the poor body image.

But since marijuana is well known to cause the "munchies," and particularly a yen for sweets, it's possible that the drug use came first.

Whatever the reason, college women—and especially [athletes](#) who need to stay fit—might listen to anti-marijuana messages that emphasize the effects on eating.

More studies are needed to uncover the reasons that young people start using [marijuana](#), despite the potential health and legal consequences, according to Buckman.

"This is a very commonly used drug," Buckman said, "and we just need to understand more about the factors that influence people to use it."

**More information:** Buckman, J. F., Yusko, D. A., Farris, S. G., White, H. R., & Pandina, R. J. (July 2011). Risk of marijuana use in male and female college student athletes and nonathletes. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 72(4), 586-591.  
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