

Teens who smoke marijuana are at risk of dangerous brain, health disorders

September 26 2014, by Evie Polsley

Whether states should legalize marijuana for recreational and medical use is a hot topic across the country. As the debate continues, more preteens, teens and young adults are beginning to use the substance with the feeling that it is safe. In fact, 36 percent of all seniors in high school and 7 percent of eighth-graders report using the drug in the past month, according to a recent study. Though the public's perception that marijuana is a harmless drug continues to increase, research shows it can have a damaging impact on developing brains and may lead to lifelong addiction.

"Teens are seeing [marijuana](#) as a safe substance, but its effects on the adolescent brain can be dangerous, especially if there is heavy use. As the stigma of marijuana use decreases, the number of teens using the drug has increased. More U.S. [high school](#) students now smoke marijuana than they do cigarettes," said Garry Sigman, MD, director of the Adolescent Medicine division at Loyola University Health System and professor in the Department of Pediatrics at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

Marijuana is an addictive substance and, according to Dr. Sigman, adolescents are 2-4 times more likely to become dependent on the drug within two years after first using it as compared with adult users.

"Marijuana is the most common substance addiction being treated in adolescents in rehabilitation centers across the country. Like all addictive substances, marijuana is used to lessen uncomfortable feelings like

anxiety and depression. Because the type of addiction is seen as less 'intense' in comparison with other substances such as cocaine or heroin, many people don't realize that marijuana can cause dependence and has a withdrawal syndrome," Sigman said.

While some adolescents use marijuana only occasionally due to peer pressure at a party or in a social setting, others self-medicate with marijuana to cope with emotions and stress. One of the signs of a substance-use disorder is when drugs are used often to cope with uncomfortable feelings.

Addiction isn't the only hazard for adolescents when it comes to smoking marijuana. Research shows that heavy use can lead to neurotoxicity and alterations in brain development leading to:

- Impairment in thinking
- Poor educational outcomes and perhaps a lower IQ
- Increased likelihood of dropping out of school
- Symptoms of chronic bronchitis
- Increased risk of psychotic disorders in those who are predisposed

"Parents should inform themselves about the scientific facts relating to marijuana and the developing brain and be able to discuss the topic calmly and rationally. They need to explain that the dose of the drug in a 'joint' is three to four times higher than in years past. Also, if the parents occasionally used marijuana during their lives, they should now know that there's a risk if used before adulthood," Sigman said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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