

Young adults' perceptions of marijuana, cigarette and e-cigarette safety may be based on mistaken beliefs

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Credit: Georgia State University

When young people consider the potential harm of tobacco and marijuana products, their assessment may be based on mistaken beliefs

about the risks of various ingredients and methods of ingesting the substances, according to a study led by a tobacco researcher from the School of Public Health at Georgia State University.

The [study participants](#) "gauged harms in nuanced ways, with criteria for judging harm differing between tobacco and marijuana products and comparing them with alcohol, illicit drugs and pharmaceuticals," the researchers said in the article "Perceived harms and benefits of tobacco, marijuana and electronic vaporizers among young adults in Colorado: Implications for health education and research." The lead author is Dr. Lucy Popova, assistant professor of health promotion and behavior and a researcher at the school's Tobacco Center of Regulatory Science (TCORS).

Researchers conducted interviews with 32 adults in Colorado, ages 18-26, who used marijuana, [tobacco](#) or e-cigarettes within a month of the study. (In 2014, Colorado became the first state to legalize retail marijuana sales. Today, nearly 30 states have legalized medicinal marijuana and eight states and the District of Columbia have legalized general use by adults.)

The paper, published in the journal *Addiction*, found participants weighed several factors in assessing the potential risk of the products: combustion, potency, chemical additives, addiction potential and the source of knowledge about the products. Products labeled as "natural" or "pure," including a cigarette brand that advertises a lack of added chemicals in processing, were perceived as safer than those with additives. The participants showed little awareness of the naturally occurring, but dangerous, chemicals in cigarettes, the study noted.

Study participants viewed smoking cigarettes as more harmful than e-cigarettes, vaporizers or the consumption of edible marijuana. However, some felt that eating marijuana products could be more risky than

smoking marijuana because edibles may have stronger doses. Few saw marijuana as potentially harmful to health or addictive. As one 19-year-old said: "Weed out of all these, to me, is not as harmful ... because they suggest it to cancer patients. It's medicinal."

Some participants acknowledged there are people in Colorado who have become "emotionally dependent, mentally dependent, on marijuana." But they viewed that as distinct from the type of addiction experienced by smokers of cigarettes and users of other drugs. Retail sellers of marijuana were viewed as a trusted source of information about various [marijuana products](#).

The researchers suggested that [public health](#) messaging is needed to counter [young people](#)'s misperception that "natural" means a product is "safe." The paper suggested additional research to inform effective [health](#) messaging aimed at young adult users of [marijuana](#), cigarettes and e-cigarettes.

More information: Lucy Popova et al. Perceived harms and benefits of tobacco, marijuana, and electronic vaporizers among young adults in Colorado: Implications for health education and research, *Addiction* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/add.13854](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13854)

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