

Why marijuana should not be banned for athletes

July 8 2021, by Lisa Marshall



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U.S. Track and Field (USATF) confirmed Tuesday that Olympic hopeful Sha'Carri Richardson will not compete in Tokyo after she tested positive for THC, the active ingredient in marijuana. Since the breakout

sprinter's 30-day suspension was announced Friday, celebrities and lawmakers, including U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, have come to her defense, calling for the World Anti-doping Agency (WADA) to re-evaluate its stance designating marijuana as a banned substance and for USATF to let Richardson compete.

WADA, which sets anti-doping guidelines for sports organizations around the world, prohibits substances which have the potential to enhance performance, pose a risk to the athlete, and/or "violate the spirit of sport."

CU Boulder Today asked Psychology and Neuroscience Professor Angela Bryan, who studies the risks and benefits of cannabis, what the science says about the relationship between weed and sport.

Is THC performance-enhancing?

There is very little research on this topic and a lot of it dates back to the '70s, but [the available data suggests](#) that cannabis is not performance-enhancing from the perspective of speed, power or strength. In one study, researchers had cyclists use cannabis, or not, and then assessed their performance on the bike. They looked at both speed and power, and both were decreased in the cannabis condition. Others have shown little or no difference in performance.

One caveat: These studies were done with a lower-potency product provided by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) for research and may not reflect what athletes are actually using these days, so more studies are needed. There is no evidence that using it a few nights before competition would influence performance days later.

A fair number of people use cannabis before or after

they exercise. Why?

In one study, we were surprised to learn about [8 out of 10 marijuana users](#) in states where cannabis is legal use it shortly before or after exercise. What we do know is that it can help with recovery in the same way that an Advil or Tylenol might. People report using it to help with post-workout pain and muscle soreness and inflammation. We also hear from some endurance athletes, including ultrarunners, who use cannabis immediately before physical activity to make their three hour run or four hour bike ride more pleasant and less dull.

To learn more about this, we will be launching a study next month in which we bring people into the lab to run on the treadmill—one time under the influence of cannabis, another time not under the influence. We will assess their experience of pain, their perception of the passage of time, and their affect—or how good they feel—while exercising.

WADA also bans substances that are 'a health risk to the athlete.' Is THC a health risk?

What we can say with some degree of certainty at this point is that high potency THC products are not great for the developing brains of young adolescents, or for people with a family or personal history of psychosis—it is probably risky for them to engage in [cannabis use](#). There are also some acute effects on verbal recall, but they are not lasting.

Other than that, there is little convincing evidence of acute or long term [health risks](#) of cannabis use, and there is certainly nowhere near the risks of using alcohol, which is not on the banned substance list. Many people die due to alcohol poisoning each year, and that simply does not happen with cannabis.

Richardson says she was using it to cope with her mother's death? Does THC help with mental health problems?

Depression, anxiety, sleep and pain are the four big reasons adults self-report using cannabis medicinally. A lot of people report that cannabis is helpful for them in dealing with a mental health crisis. We are still learning about this and our lab has several studies underway. What I do know this this: If she had had a couple of beers or a glass of wine to cope with the death of her mother we would not be having this conversation.

In your opinion, based on the science, should THC remain banned for elite athletes?

Given there is no convincing evidence THC boosts performance, and it is legal in the vast majority of U.S. states and in entire countries, including Canada, I do not think it should be included as a banned substance for elite athletes or for any other kind of [athlete](#) for that manner. That said, I would in no way endorse Olympic athletes taking cannabis immediately before competing. My perspective is more that athletes using cannabis in their down time either recreationally or as an aid to recovery should not be held against them in terms of competition.

Provided by University of Colorado at Boulder

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